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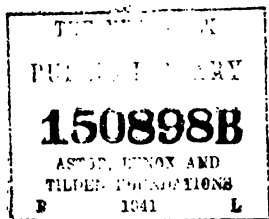
THE WHITE MOTH

BY
RUTH MURRAY UNDERHILL

*The white moth to the closing bine,
The bee to the opened clover,
And the gypsy blood to the gypsy blood
Ever the wide world over.
Ever the wide world over, lass,
Ever the trail held true,
Over the world and under the world,
And back at last to you. — KIPLING*



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THE WHITE MOTH

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THE WHITE MOTH

CHAPTER I

HILDA was not crying. In fact, the whole thing had happened so insidiously that she had not perceived how dreadful it was; even now, for a while, she would be able to look about and smile and not grant it. So she looked about and smiled.

Within reaching distance of her hand was the back of Elsie Rice. Now and then Elsie stepped back, laughing, from the group around her, and Hilda's white satin slippers were in danger. Then Hilda moved, smiling readily. But Elsie never looked around.

On the other side was the back of Janey Hubbell. Janey's back was covered with tight-stretched white organdie, through which there showed creases from underneath: when she moved she brushed Hilda's elbow with a huge white satin bow. A long while ago Hilda had been interested in the bow, shaped like a cabbage and pinched and tweaked into faultless rotundity. Janey's dressmaker mother must have done it. But for five whole minutes Hilda had been gazing into its convolutions without seeing them, because she had nothing else to do. Janey was talking to a boy.

"And don't let anybody take the first extra!"

The boy trotted away and Janey turned with a look of glorified carelessness to Hilda. She was going to say something! Hilda was going to laugh and talk and be part of it just like anyone else! But Otto Marks, racing by, caught Janey's eye.

"Hello there, how's your card, Jinny Jane?"

Janey turned away. Before Hilda could realize the desertion she was walking across the room with Otto. And Elsie! Hilda should never have looked away from Elsie's group, such a big one and it concealed her so decently. Hilda turned in a panic toward their sheltering backs. It was too late. The group had moved away, putting between them and Hilda a space of shining floor, not to be crossed without audacity, inventiveness, or an invitation. The time when Hilda could look about and smile was over. She stayed where she was.

She was near the door, the sleek, oak-framed door of the High School assembly room, which Hilda herself had wreathed with laurel. The little draught that crept through the hall outside brought her the spicy scent of the green leaves, mixed with the odor of floor wax and the cool cleanness of a garnished room. Laurel always made Hilda's heart beat. They associated it in Cato with camp chairs and ice cream freezers, funerals, church socials, and events not of every day.

This was an event not of every day. The out-

side door of the school kept slamming in a breeze of arrival, reverberating above the sound of girls' laughter and boys' voices in queer, restrained tones. Outside the door where Hilda stood the girls passed muffled and whispering. Ranged along the wall a row of boys, all in white flannel trousers and blue serge coats, blew cigarette smoke and talked in nervous, jerky bass. Hilda would have given worlds to be outside that door, careless, expectant, matter of fact, with the evening to start all over again. But it would be as hard to do that as to unlive a year of one's life. She stood inside and the new arrivals, unfamiliar, conquering, pushed past her.

"Hello, Hil!"

"Oh, I think you look awfully nice."

"Listen, can you see my petticoat?"

"My dear, I think Jack's out in the hall."

The girls did not look as they did at school. Hilda's new airiness made her feel shy, but theirs seemed to make their voices higher and their eyes brighter. Because their dresses were thinner the girls seemed *warmer*. Each new bevy brought fresh hope. They surrounded Hilda and she caught a little of the warmth: she clutched her program and began to forget.

But Fate was not to be fooled. Fate knew who had been standing half an hour with no one to look at her card, and who had just come and was entitled to a chance. The incoming tide split about

Hilda as about a rock and left her where it found her. She stood erect; even disaster could not bow her square young shoulders all at once. But the feeling that came over her was cold, gripping, relentless, a presentment of suffering such as she had not imagined.

Hilda, you see, had not understood sufficiently this matter of being "taken" to a dance, when your house was just around the corner. She knew the practise existed, of course. Girls talked about it at school, girls who had spent the previous evening with a "crowd" and a phonograph, when Hilda had spent it with the dishpan and the English history. Such girls treated you as an equal in the daytime when no boys were present. Hilda was on the dance committee, of course, as she was on every committee where there was work to be done. But her main preoccupation there was orchestra hire and the wholesale price of macaroons. About dance partners she was unimpressed.

"I say," Otto Marks had proposed, "*no taking*. This is for the whole class. Let's just all go and be — be — democratic."

"Sure," agreed Guy Nearing, the president. "Let's make a lark of it."

Everybody voted yes. Hilda voted yes and thought no more about it.

Now she understood. While, for her, the world went on as usual, there had been notes passed to

and fro in geometries and elusive words exchanged at gates when people saw other people home from school. The proposed democracy of the high school dance faded into an unregarded theory and Hilda did not know it.

Up to this very night at supper time she had not known it. All day she and Otto Marks and Joe Byers had worked like friends and equals, arranging the camp chairs, banking the palms, stretching above the stage the class motto, "Semper Fidelis." Hilda had been tired and content when she left them at the school house door. She had gone home to supper with her younger brothers and sisters respectful, with her mother pleased and hurried over the Indian pudding, with the dress upstairs, waiting. And while she was at supper the world had changed.

She had left for the dance early. As she ran down her path, in the early twilight, with the scent of wistaria in the air and her mind on the refreshments, Guy Nearing had called from his lawn next door:

"Oh, going, Hil? I say, I'll catch up to you."

Guy had not caught up. It was a graceful move on the part of the class president to pretend that he would come early and help unload ice cream freezers. Of course Guy would try to. But Mrs. Nearing was very particular about the looks of her son, and modest drudgery was not the forte of the most attractive boy in town. Hilda had entered the assembly hall alone.

She would have paid with blood now to recapture her daytime sense of possession in it, the sense that she had felt when she had raced from one end to the other placing the potted palms and draping the flags above the windows. Now she did not dare move a step in it. She looked with humble awe at Edie Rogers, the stupidest girl in the class, who slid the length of the floor and raced Jimmy Mallison up the platform steps to tell the orchestra what waltz she liked. The hall belonged now to girls who had partners.

It was full now. Hilda's isolation was a thing that she understood and that the other girls understood, but all around her the girls were pattering, sliding on the smooth floor with little excited squeals. Just beside her someone sprung back from a laughing group.

"Johnny, you big idiot, you just can't."

"Oh, poor sport, poor sport! Who're you saving it for?"

"None of your business. Hil, isn't he dreadful?"

Hilda was used to being appealed to on matters of justice: she raised her blue eyes seriously.

"Can Elsie say she's saving it, Hil, if she doesn't know who it's for?"

"Maybe I just won't tell."

"Bet you he hasn't asked you."

Elsie Rice blushed: or, Hilda realized afterward that that sudden color was a blush. They did not

do it much at school and she was not expecting the phenomenon. She gained a minute's footing of equality on the basis of that.

"Hil, isn't he *dreadful*!"

Elsie, little brown curls very fluffy on her forehead, white silk ankles in tremendous evidence, drew Hilda aside in the sudden intimacy which belongs to two girls in the presence of a man.

"Hil, Guy is coming, isn't he?"

"Why, of course. But I've seen to the ice cream."

And then Hilda blushed, but she did not know it. She only knew that there grew within her, until she felt hot and lost and ready to cry, the understanding that neither Elsie Rice, nor Guy Nearing, nor anybody else in that hall, was interested in the ice cream. Elsie moved away.

The first small, appealing notes of the violins stole through the hall. Boys started across the hall, girls stepped forward. As they brushed past Hilda, her heart jumped and did not quiet. All of a sudden the assembly hall became a place such as Hilda had never known in the years of her life. There was radiance in that hall, there was allurements and mystery and delight. It was full of white figures, but they were not the girls she knew: they were girls going to dance with boys. There was a stir in the room, but it was not the sound of feet which trudged every day through the streets of Cato: it was a surge to whose rhythm Hilda's heart stirred

too. Even through the cold pall of misery that enveloped her, she remembered that this was the supreme night that closed her childhood. For as far back as Hilda could remember, she had looked forward to this night and planned to be happy.

There was a desert around her now, red carpet camp chairs to the right and red carpet camp chairs to the left, and, on a space of glistening floor, Hilda, with her skirts uncrushed, and the breeze blowing across the instep of her new silk stockings. She felt strange in her new dress, tight in unaccustomed places and not there at all in others. She had thought, while that dress was being made, that the one evening for which it was destined was fatally short. She had wished in her secret heart, that she might have a chance to stand for hours in it alone, with her new white shoes and her hair done, and nothing to do but *feel* the dress. Because, on the evening of the senior party, she would not be alone. The dress would turn her into a gauzy princess and boys would think she was pretty and ask her to dance.

She was not a princess. She had looked into the mirror before she came and had seen, a little dazed, that her eyes were no bluer than they had been, nor her hair any more golden brown. Yet she had on the dress: perhaps unknown to her the miracle had happened. To other girls it had happened. Their petticoats were no crisper than Hilda's and their

brown hair no thicker. But boys bent sleek heads over their cards and placed arms around their waists. Hilda saw, and a lump came into her throat, not of the kind that dissolves with sudden tears. It was of the sort that goes with a pounding heart and cold fingers and a sense of creeping, untellable misery. The first dance was beginning.

"Oh, my *dear*, he's there!"

Just in front of Hilda one girl gripped another's arm. They were girls with unfilled programs and they had been moving toward the wall, but they stopped, a fierce light of expectancy in their eyes.

"By the platform. He's talking to Elsie Rice's crowd."

The note in their voices was the war cry: it made even Hilda shudder with helpless excitement.

"Welcome to our hall! This is our honored president himself!"

The groups all surged forward: the lifted violin bows paused. The girl in front of Hilda sighed.

"He is good looking!"

He was. Hilda had always thought so, since she was old enough to think such things at all. But she never compared Guy with anybody else. You had to think of words, perhaps, to describe Otto Marks' sandy head, or the lumpy squareness of Joe Byers. But Guy's black head, with the jagged dip of hair across the forehead, and Guy's long legs, which covered twenty times a day the space between

one place of mischief and another, were simply — Guy's.

"Fascination," the older women called it, out of earshot of the younger. And the younger did not bother with words for it: only the dance stopped when Guy came in.

"Awful sorry. Honest! Say, who put up that class motto? It looks swell."

Joe Byers beamed. Edie Rogers, on tiptoe, poked her chin over his shoulder.

"Doesn't it make you feel inspired, Guy?"

Guy thrust his hands in his coat pockets and everyone realized with a start of surprise that they were not blue serge pockets. They were gray: gray jersey. Gray jersey was understood to be a grade above blue serge for years in Cato after that. He shot a mischievous glance at the waiting Edie.

"Not forever. I have to be — encouraged."

Edie was radiant: she wriggled free of Jimmy Mallison's detaining arm. The raised violin bows touched the strings again: Guy turned and made a whimsical face at the orchestra.

"Wait a minute. I gotta get a girl."

Of course Guy Nearing could afford to wait until the last minute before a dance and then proceed light heartedly to get a girl. As he turned to glance about the room, waists already encircled were withdrawn, attention that should have been focussed on partners went stealing away toward him and that

roving glance. Guy took a running jump and slid half way down the room.

"Hildare!"

The two rigid girls in front of Hilda stood aside: everybody in the neighborhood turned.

"Where the dickens were you? Oh, Hil, I *like* you tonight!"

The last was low. As she heard it, it seemed as though a door opened in Hilda's heart. Through that door she went out of a desolate, icy country into a place full of sunshine, and the door closed behind her. She answered him, just a little shy smile.

"Let's dance, yes?"

Guy's arm was around her waist: he was dancing in miniature already. Hilda placed her fingers on his arm. She forgot that she had planned since she was in the kindergarten to be happy tonight; she simply was happy.

Hilda had never thought she danced well, but one did not have to, with Guy. Her straight young back yielded naturally to his persuasive arm; her full tanned throat pulsed rhythmically; her gray blue eyes, just a little below his dark ones, glowed with a calm intensity from which one would not look away, once he had seen it.

"Hildare, you look — sweet!"

It was a schoolboy word, but Guy had not chosen badly. He caught his breath a little as he said it,

looking at the sweep of crinkly brown hair and the curve of apricot-tinted cheek. It did not occur to Hilda to reply, even by a pressure of the sturdy brown hand that was in his. But, after a minute Guy said a surprising thing:

"You dance so well tonight, Hildear."

The music had stopped and everyone stood still in the middle of the floor to clap. The uncommunicative orchestra, having changed their music sheets, sat back and looked at the ceiling.

"Hil," Guy clapped joyously, with his arm still around her waist, "I've got to have a lot, you know."

Hilda smiled at that, just as though she were one of the other girls. But Guy Nearing never stood alone in the middle of a room except by choice. People came sliding to them across the floor from all directions.

"I say, Guy, what about speeches at supper? Aren't you going to give us one?"

The class president considered with raised eyebrow.

"About semper fidelis?"

"Well, you chose it." Otto Marks was very serious. "And I think we ought to make the supper quite — quite a thing, you know. Graduated, and our last night together. I've got the seats all arranged with you at the head of the table and the secretary," he nodded to Hilda, "and the treasurer at each side." Otto Marks was the treasurer.

The president was kind. "All right. Might as well, I guess. Where's your card, Hil?"

Otto, with a possible train of events in mind, suggested hopefully:

"Hilda might make a speech too. She could."

Hilda had been salutatorian the morning before, so of course this was true. But it had not been thought of.

"Certainly, Hil too," agreed the president, who never had to safeguard his own honors.

But Hilda only smiled serenely. Guy's generosity was not misplaced for it happened that, rather than make a speech, rather, in fact, than anything she had been able to imagine in seventeen tranquil years, Hilda would like to sit by the side of the class president, at the head of a long table, and have on a dress that all the girls might look at, and hear Guy honored.

"You'll be enough, Guy," she said.

Otto Marks went away sorrowing. And the class president took the secretary's program and, using her smooth tanned arm as a table, wrote his name down for five dances. "And the supper dance, of course." Completeness like that can come but once in life.

Elsie Rice captured Guy after that, but Hilda was not alone; the splendor of her recent association hovered about her. It was with the self-possession of a princess that she showed her card to the boys

who came to inquire in Guy's train. It was filled with initials without her perceiving it: the process no longer seemed mysterious or weighty. The evening was dreamlike, one triumphant progress toward the supper dance. When Hilda stood clapping next to another girl at an encore, she had a smile of freemasonry. The girls' eyes were bright and their lips broke into breathless, uncontrollable smiles. Hilda smiled too, and she did not know the light of happiness that was in her own eyes.

"Hil, isn't it glorious!" Janey Hubbell squeezed her arm between dances. Hilda smiled back. It was not etiquette to remember coldness at times like these.

"Oh, and my dear, you've got the best of all! We're simply wildly jealous. He never *looks* at anybody else."

"Oh, Janey!"

"It must be wonderful," breathed Janey in awe, "to have the richest father in town and everybody crazy about you."

"Oh, Janey."

"Oh, Janey, oh, Janey, oh, Janey!" Guy had pirouetted up, hair in curly damp streaks on his forehead, a sense about him as of electricity darting and snapping.

"Oh, Janey, what a nice big bow! May I smell it?"

"Aren't you crazy!"

"Yes, I'm very crazy!" He was already keeping time to the first tentative bars of a new waltz. "Do you know that in one minute I'm going to grab a girl and whirl right out of this room and right down Main Street, and I don't know whether I'll come back."

Janey, under his sidelong dark eyes, bridled a little.

"Want to see me?" queried the boy.

Janey giggled.

And Hilda, while she stood in that luminous dream that had enwrapped her more or less all the evening, felt herself seized round the waist. Janey dropped into nothingness as though she had never existed.

"Hil, listen!"

They were at the end of the dance, a dance that had gone past almost without speech. Hilda was often a silent person when there were no facts to be dealt with; tonight it seemed to her there was a fact, but there were no words for it. And Guy was taking it in silence.

"Hildare, let's go out by the river."

His appeal was gentle, and more humble than Guy was accustomed to be. His arm at her waist was very tense.

Hilda looked at her white satin shoes. Walking down a dirty path appeared to her a thing you could do in the back yard at home. The river path had led away from the back door of the school ever since

they had both been there. She might have visited it with Guy on any morning or evening during the past ten years: she might still do it in the next ten. And tonight, for the first time in her life, she was at a dance, with a dress she liked and her card full. She might have tried to say this. But Hilda had lived next door to Guy Nearing for nearly seventeen years, and during that time, the only occasions when she had said "no" to him, were those when he had offered to do something to save her trouble.

Her hand was in his arm. "Is it this way?"

They shouldered their way out among the couples, a laughing, trampling crowd. So this was where everybody went between dances: Hilda had wondered why the room thinned. In the glow of the red lanterns one's white organdie was unimportant. And yet, it was not unexciting here.

When the creaking door shut them out in June air and faint lantern light Hilda noticed that voices became suddenly hushed. Guy's arm was close under hers: it was unnecessary, for Guy knew perfectly well that Hilda could walk sturdily, even with the unusual handicap of white satin slippers. But Hilda, usually the first one to point out such a fact and save him trouble, said nothing tonight.

"What a lot of them there are! Let's run, shall we, Hildare?"

That was unfair, for Guy was the champion runner of the class. But it was not a feat of endurance

tonight, it was only that he took her hand and they floated past the white, giggling couples, down the smooth path among the elm trees.

"Gee, you scared me!"

At the turn where the lanterns ceased, they had run straight into a glimmering white mass. It looked like one person to Hilda, but it was two.

"Trust you, Guy, to be going further than anybody else! Who've you got?"

"Who've you?"

Hilda had been going to join in the conversation: she sat next to Johnny Ilseng in Latin class. But at the thrilling, excited giggle that answered, she was suddenly silent. This was not Latin class.

"Girls look just alike in the dark," offered Guy, with deviltry in his tone. "Let's mix 'em up!"

"Guy Nearing, don't you dare!"

And if anybody in the world wanted him to dare, it was the girl whose high, breathless voice broke in with that.

"One, two, three!"

There was a whirl, a shriek, more laughter. Hilda found herself bumped into that other girl, Elsie Rice, as she had known from the first moment. And then, with an arm around her waist, she was hurried out of the turmoil, around the bend and into the dark, where there was no light but the glow from a farmhouse window, and the river, low in June, could be heard rippling about its boulders in the dark.

"Can we sit down here?"

The voice was still Guy's. But Hilda had known who was with her: it was quite natural to her that she should recognize Guy's touch in the dark, from any touch in Cato or in the world.

Guy often required of Hilda strange things, from explaining why he failed in Latin, when she had forgotten to do his translation, to amusing him all day when he was ill so that she must sit up at night to do her own studying. Sacrifice and Guy had no connection: just for a minute Hilda thought of the white organdie which had meant a year's economies and then she forgot it. Guy's tone had never been humble like this. Hilda might have said "no" that night and been obeyed. She sat down.

The sound of the river, in the little pause that followed, was very loud. And though there were no other sounds, the memory of music and laughter was eddying still in Hilda's brain: her heart would not slow its pace.

Guy had got down on his knees to dust off a place among the pine needles. Guy was ruthless about white flannel trousers: Hilda was thankful in this case as she had often been before, that you escaped the consequences of so many things when your father was rich.

"Hil — "

He was still kneeling, just in front of her: she could see the outline of his head against a twilit

space of sky. There was a little lock of hair that stood out, triangular, and at the sight of it Hilda's heart gave a strangling leap. He said nothing else. Hilda's hands, in her lap, were clasped very tight; one of his was on her knee. Gradually, while they both watched every motion, he sank into place beside her. From a clump of birches the little sharp peep of a tree toad broke the silence.

"Won't they be dancing in there?"

"What do we care?"

She did not care: that was only an echo of the things that had gone past. It did not matter that this was Hilda's first dance and first real frock. It did not matter that the river walk was open to the citizens of Cato at all times of the day and night and that there were some thousands of hours past and to come when Guy might have suggested this very thing. He had not. And as Hilda sat, very still, with the fragile pine needles sharp against the unaccustomed silk stockings, she understood that it was because this night was like none of those hours past, nor to come.

Guy's hand, with the slender, straight fingers, came over and clasped hers.

"I'd like to dance to the tune the river makes. We could do it sitting down. But don't let's move *these* hands."

A little later Hilda said: "It's the supper dance."

She was sorry her ears were so sharp. She had

waited in vain for Guy to notice it first: now she felt it the secretary's duty to awaken the president to the task of taking his honors. She felt Guy's breath hot against her hair: the violence of his tone was startling.

"Let it go hang!"

He had her hands now: Hilda had given them freely. He had never done that before and she was very much aware that he had not. But Guy had only to want. In the intense quiet that descended with the withdrawal of the distant laughter, she was aware of having been removed forever out of the world where the supper dance was taking place, out of the world where the river was flowing about its bowlders, even out of the world of pine needles and silence in which she had been a moment since.

Guy need not have spoken. In fact, his voice was very low. It came after silence and it was not answered.

"Hildare, we love each other, don't we?"

They were very close together. For a little time, each sat absolutely still: not a motion, not a breath, to disturb that intense, delicate contact of shoulder against shoulder and arm against arm. Then Guy took a long breath and Hilda, dizzy with the sense of unity, breathed too. The dark, still place was filled with warmth. Hilda had, while her eyes still saw black trees and gray, sliding water, a sense of the red, leaping warmth of firelight, present but unseen.

She did not even see Guy. She used to have a sense, when he was near her, of the slender squareness of his shoulders, the quick grace of his hands. She did not have it now. It was as if, to see those things, one must have been absurdly far away. She was not sure that the thing of which she was conscious was even Guy. She was conscious of warmth, of nearness, of her heart beating like that of a giant, of a sense of peace and power together.

When she relaxed and leaned back for a minute, with her eyes open to the cool line of tree tops, she had realized that it was Guy who had held her in his arms; that he was still a separate person who could draw away, that his arms and heart were not forever confounded with hers. He had not drawn away far. It was his arm against which she was leaning. But she watched his profile against the blackness with something like terror, as though she were learning the look of a man whom she had never seen before. She hung on the motions of that dimly seen figure as though they were incalculable and she had no part in them.

Then, very slowly in the faint light, she knew his head was bending toward her. She waited and, if Hilda could have seen her eyes, their light was intense, arresting. A shiver shook her, so that it shook him, too. Then the kiss came.

"Hildare, we're going to get married."

It was a long time after. Very blessedly, with a

slowness that did not hurt, the wonder too intense had lifted. It was the Guy she knew, sitting before Hilda now, with a few of the rags of mortality still about him. He was cross legged on the grass before her with his hands clasped over her knees: they had used to sit like that once when they built block houses together. Hilda smiled in the dark, her hands warm and firm under his.

"Understand, Hil?"

"Yes."

That was very low, but it told the thing Hilda had understood best ever since the wonder began.

Guy flamed. "Oh, it'll be wonderful, Hildare! Listen! I'm going to be rich. Oh, Hil, Hil, what won't I do!"

He was up on his knees now, with his hands on her shoulders. Hilda, tranquil, with that steady warmth still thrilling her, told him gently:

"Guy — dear. We're young."

"Oh, yes." Hilda could imagine his grimace. But he did not tumble out a flood of extravagant words. He said, in a voice that caught a little, that hardly sounded like Guy: "But — for you! Honest, dear, if I work. Hil, you'll wait?" His hands suddenly gripped her with trembling violence. "You'll remember? You're mine?"

"Why, *Guy*."

Hilda's voice was very low: the breathless amazement in it left him quite silent. Then he was beside

her again, his head against her shoulder, talking very fast to the folds of white organdie.

"Listen, Hil. I'm going to do something. Work, you know. I want you to be proud."

"Guy —"

"Oh, Hil — after a lot of years — maybe not so many — you and I — Hil, I'm going to take care of you. Always!"

His tone was reverent. In all her life Hilda had not heard from Guy that tone of purpose and humility.

"I want my — wife — to be *looked after*."

They were both awed by the word that had passed Guy's lips. They clung together, almost afraid of the night and of the whispering universe around them, and yet masters of it, too. He said at last, with his lips close to her ear, his forehead against her hair: "Supposing it was — years, Hil. Would you think it was long?"

"I, dear?"

It was amazing to Hilda that anyone should consider her part in a difficult undertaking. Her little tanned fingers, elusive in spite of their strength, went to his cheek.

"It mustn't be a burden to you."

"Hil," he clasped his knees and the vibration in his voice made her quiver, "I think — I'm going to be — the greatest man on *earth*!"

Then his voice dropped to a tone that went to

Hilda's heart, because, in answer to such a tone you usually had food, or help or comfort to bring. It was not a tone that women allow to go unanswered.

"You will wait, Hil? Even if I — didn't get great right away and couldn't come back to you? You will wait for me, no matter how long it is —" Guy caught his breath and said a word new for them both — "my beloved?"

Hilda Plaisted had passed an examination in English. Perhaps she knew the words "forever," "unchangeable," "eternal." They were not needed by such as she. With her hands clasped still in her lap and her look on Guy's, she answered him and gave everything that she had.

"I'll wait."

CHAPTER II

"AND Mrs. Nearing's jelly mould? I'll take it over."

It was the very still hour of mid-Sunday afternoon. In the Plaisted's back garden the rabbits were all asleep in a furry white mound behind their wire netting, the birch tree stood, gold-green against the sun, without a tremor of its feathery new leaves. Mrs. Plaisted was just going upstairs with *The Christian Herald*, after seeing the children off to Sunday School. Mr. Plaisted was already asleep in the hammock on the front porch. On the back porch, on the top step, with their arms about their knees, Hilda and Janey Hubbell sat in the sun-flecked shadow of the morning-glory vines.

"So, I think he likes me. We're going canoeing today."

It was Janey, very formal, in a spotted muslin with a high satin belt. Hilda, her blue linen immaculate now that the kitchen apron was off, sat in silence, her cheeks warm in the sunlight and her eyes dreamy.

"Hil," Janey snuggled closer, "Mr. Nearing's frightfully rich, isn't he?"

The pleat had been rumbled out of Hilda's skirt: firm tanned fingers replaced it. "Going to be out late, Janey?"

"That remains to be seen," admitted Miss Hubbell. "Hil, what's Guy going to do? Now, I mean?"

It was obvious from Janey's air that the world had paused in its endless revolutions while a class from the Cato High School stood wavering in the breathless June quiet before they plunged. They would choose and the world would go on again, accelerated. "Otto," she stated, "starts at the clothing store tomorrow."

Hilda gasped. She might have been expecting the world to pause longer.

"Will Guy go to the Works?"

Hilda's eyes were luminous with the remembrance of evenings on the porch steps, half real, untellable. She had revealed, before she was able to revise those dreams:

"He'll go away, maybe."

"Honest?" Janey was awed. "To Chicago? To get in some big business?"

Hilda did not deny it. She only said, with a seriousness that electrified Janey: "What is a good salary? When you start in?"

"For Guy? Oh, Guy would get something grand! He's awfully bright, Hilda, even if he doesn't study. I believe even Miss Baynes thinks so."

Hilda did not deny that either.

"And," said Janey wistfully, "people just sort of do things for Guy."

The wistfulness had its cause. Guy was very catholic in his selection of the people he allowed to do things for him, and Janey happened to be a specialist in pressing botany specimens.

"They do things," explained Hilda, with a prim little air of justice about her, "because he has a Future."

Janey made no attempt to discriminate on those heights: she just nodded. "What do you think he'll be, Hil? A financier, I suppose?"

But Hilda had other data. "Boy's don't have to do just what their fathers did."

That suggested giddy possibilities to Janey. "I think Guy looks just glorious in running clothes."

"He could," said Hilda, driven to it, and with her voice very impersonal, "do other things beside win athletic meets if he wanted to."

"Oh, Hil, I know he could. I just said that because — because — it's the only thing he's done. But I think it was just too grand, the way he went through with it, when everybody said he was too light and everything and they nearly took him out for bad school work! Wasn't he fierce and queer, the way he worked at it, Hil?"

Hilda had reason to know, fierceness and queer-ness not being concealed from a girl who lives next door. But she nodded her head with a reminiscent

smile, just a bit maternal, and more arresting to Janey than any amount of maidenly enthusiasm.

"Guy," she said, "can do most anything — when he wants to."

"I think it's stunning to be so stubborn." Janey sighed. After all, she had to admire from afar. "But Otto is more — reasonable."

"Guy isn't stubborn all the time."

"He thinks," said Janey with insight, her mind not being on the subject, "of too many things he wants to do. He can't be stubborn about them all." Then she affected much preoccupation. "Dear me, Hil, you have a caller."

Around from the front gate, beside the narrow bed of sweet alyssum, there tramped the heavy figure of Otto Marks. He sat down on the lowest step, imposing in his blue Sunday suit.

"Hello, Hil."

"Hello, Otto."

"Hello, Janey."

"Aren't we grand today!"

"You and Guy going canoeing, Hil?"

Otto's intentions had been sufficiently expressed. Hilda answered meekly: "We haven't said."

Otto fanned himself and looked across the Plais-teds' back lawn. A syringa hedge, all in perfume on the hot June afternoon, separated it from the smooth mound where the Nearing mansion stood.

"Where's Guy been since the dance?"

"At home. He was sick."

Janey thrilled at the possessive answer. Otto gazed mildly at the amplitude of the chocolate-colored mansion.

"Gee," he marvelled without envy, "work too hard for exams and then get sick and have all the time you want — !"

"Otto!"

Otto was not abashed. "Guy passed a lot better than I did," he admitted. "And I worked quite some, too. Well, Hil, glad I saw you this afternoon. Janey and I have got a date on the river. Coming, Janey?"

"Oh, I guess so. Will we see you later, Hil?" Janey was clinging to Hilda in that access of affection that takes place when one is going away with a boy.

"Maybe."

"Oh, I guess I know." Suddenly Janey put her mouth close to Hilda's ear, her back ostentatiously turned to Otto. "Are we going to hear of you being engaged to a millionaire some day?"

This was extreme, an implication never indulged in except out of spite or between intimates: it was supposed to be a bad augury. Hilda's blush was slow, enveloping. Janey was awed, and as she walked down that path by Otto's side she looked at him with eyes more womanly than either of them had expected.

The blush had not died away when Hilda went into the kitchen and took the jelly mould from the tubs. She stood for a minute in the darkened room, listening to the clock, immovable, as though it were a world she must get up her courage to traverse. Then she swung open the screen door.

They had wonderful sunlight in Cato. Outside, the intense warmth and peace of mid afternoon was flooding still green lawns and empty porches. The path that she followed led through a little gap, over which the syringas met. On the other side of the hedge, the cozy utility of the Plaisted's yard was left behind. The Nearing lawn was very spacious and very smooth, for Mr. Nearing liked to have things neat. The back porch was shaded with honeysuckle and beside the doormat a row of empty milk bottles waited for the next morning. The back door was closed, but not locked: the two servants were always out on Sunday afternoon.

The door opened soundlessly and Hilda pushed her way down the darkened hall where the black walnut stair rail loomed so enormous in the twilight. Mrs. Nearing would, perhaps, be in the back sitting room and Mr. Nearing asleep.

There were more persons than one in the back sitting room, probably visitors. But, as everybody knew everybody else in Cato, Hilda pushed open the door. It was Mrs. Nearing's clear-cut voice that she heard.

"I don't think you see the matter fairly, James."

The voices stopped. Hilda, in the doorway, did not retreat.

The Nearings' back sitting room was, to her, almost the most familiar place on earth. She had had her place in it since she could toddle, first on the green Brussels carpet, where she and Guy played store with the bits of steel that Mr. Nearing brought home from the factory; then in the tapestried arm chair with the skirt of fringe where they looked at picture books; then at the centre table with the green flowered cover where they had done their lessons. Every night they were in the first grade they sat there, Hilda motionless and intent, with the lamp light golden on a thick braid of brown hair, Guy in a series of attitudes whose twining possibilities none but he would have imagined. In the black walnut rocker which she had brought from the east with her wedding presents Mrs. Nearing always sat and crocheted and interrupted spasmodically with news about Cato. And at the big impressive desk near the window where nothing but household accounts were ever done, Mr. Nearing read the *Evening Citizen* and waited to be called on when the arithmetic went wrong. That was until last week.

On this Sunday afternoon the green shades of the sitting room were half drawn: on the black marble mantel piece the vases glimmered in immaculate

order: a blaze of sunlight struck through the west window and faded a huge pink carpet rose at Mrs. Nearing's feet.

Mrs. Nearing was in the black walnut arm chair, just as immaculate as she had been in church, for Mrs. Nearing never changed on Sunday afternoon. Very tall and slender, the donor of those lines of Guy's, she sat erect, her black head with the waves of gray, held commandingly. She had spoken and she waited for Mr. Nearing to answer.

Hilda had a perception that Mr. Nearing would find it hard. He was standing beside his big neat desk, an earnest, chubby man, half a head shorter than his wife. About his round face that was a little worn, there was something, as always in these interviews, both obstinate and childlike.

"That's it, Moth! Go it!"

In the middle of the room, in the full beam of sunlight which Mrs. Nearing had moved her chair to avoid, Guy perched on the table.

"Why, it's Hildare!"

Dark hair on end, eyes brilliant, he leaped upon her.

"I brought the jelly mould."

Guy, having seized both Hilda's hands, had been obliged to take the jelly mould. He gazed at it abstractedly and shied it toward the sofa. "Hil! You talk to Father!"

"Your father is going to consider it, Guy."

"I know. But let Hil talk too."

It was not the first time that Hilda had assisted at family discussions: no one stopped a quarrel because of her arrival. Guy dragged her to a seat and swung to the table above her, his fingers on her shoulder. "You'll make him see my way!"

"But, Guy, dear, had Hilda heard about your uncle's letter?"

"No," said Guy sublimely. "Listen, Hildare, it's this way. Mother's people have written from the east about why I don't come there to college. They live in the town. And there are lots more opportunities after you've been east. And I could come there and get ready for this fall. And I'd have to go right away —"

Words rather fell over themselves here and were replaced by one of Guy's appealing smiles. "See, Hildare?"

At that minute a chasm opened before Hilda such as she remembered for the rest of her life. The word "east" was not a common word to Hilda: it meant a place some hundreds of miles away where she could not go. And the word "college" meant four years. They dropped into her consciousness like a stone in the dark, seeking bottomless depths. She could not speak just then.

Mrs. Nearing explained softly: "Guy is at the threshold of his career. I thought —"

"You thought I might get to be the smartest man

in the place. Get hold of pots of money. Come home with all sorts of jobs!"

Guy's eyes were dancing with elation. They turned from Mrs. Nearing's, luminous and adoring, to Mr. Nearing's, unseen behind their glasses.

Mr. Nearing had not yet spoken. He said now: "No. We don't"

Guy's flight of enthusiasm was brought up short. He eyed his father in silence, biting his lips, one foot swinging dangerously.

"One job's enough," said Mr. Nearing.

"Oh! James dear!"

Mrs. Nearing never raised her voice: all Cato was perpetually astonished at the amount of meaning with which she managed to charge those few tones. Guy was defended and Mr. Nearing hunched his shoulders with a submissive movement.

"You're not asking that Guy should decide just yet what he wants to do when he has," her eyes rested, glowing, on her son, "so many possibilities. Surely there is time."

"His work's here, Mother."

Mr. Nearing's lips closed tight — and Mrs. Nearing's. And Guy's. There was no lack of determination in that family. After the dead silence, it was on another note that Mrs. Nearing spoke. Her voice had a haunting quiver in it, what Hilda still thought of as a grown-up quiver. Hilda had never had the feeling that could produce such a tone.

"I think there is no use in being disappointed," said Mrs. Nearing. "I am not saying anything against Cato. You and I have found our work here. But I don't see any reason why we should tie Guy to it."

It seemed to Hilda that Mr. Nearing must be wanting to cry, for that was how she herself felt. And Mr. Nearing did speak, after a dreadful pause, like an obstinate child, keeping its courage up. He kept his head down and talked fast, just like Guy.

"When there's a factory within sight of your second storey windows that goes by your father's name and has got room for as many people as want to put their noses to the grindstone!"

"James dear! At seventeen?"

"Why the *mischief* should I like cutlery!" Guy had not got to the point of swearing in that house, but his cry was passionate.

Mr. Nearing looked at him very strangely: resigned and dumb.

Guy blazed. "You don't inherit it, do you? Just because I've heard about brass tacks and steel shavings all my life" — he kicked through the table fringe, his voice trembling — "I don't have to love 'em, do I!"

"Guy! Guy!"

Mr. Nearing said nothing. He looked at Hilda: she felt as though he were seeking protection.

"Of course the business is awfully interesting, Mr.

Nearing. I'm glad you've talked to us both such a lot."

Mr. Nearing stirred as though that had helped him. Guy erupted. "Oh, Hil likes steel tacks and — boneheads or whatever it is. She's heard about 'em as much as I have. Let Hil go into the Cutlery Works. She could cuttle."

There was a silence after this so bleak that they all suffered. It was Nearing, mild, indomitable, who felt it necessary to answer.

"She could learn. *Anybody* can."

Hilda put out a hand with sublime boldness and grasped Guy's to keep him silent. He returned her clasp instantly with hot fingers. And while they sat, both too new, too abashed at that contact to be capable of any words, Mrs. Nearing spoke again. They felt little after they had heard: they felt too young to speak.

"I thought we said, when we came here, that our children should go east to college."

"You still set store by that, Mother?"

"All the more," said Mrs. Nearing. She left a little silence in which the two by the table did not dare to look at the older people. Then they knew that her eyes were resting on Guy.

"I am hoping for Guy," she said, "all the things that we have never had, things that Cato could never offer."

Mr. Nearing stirred, but they knew it was not a

movement of dissent, nothing to combat. It sounded like a person turning wretchedly in his sleep.

"Of course, Mother."

"We can give him this at least. There's no need for him to work right away."

"No. No need."

"Nor to tie himself down to one thing when he has all the future before him." Mrs. Nearing took a breath. "Is there, Hilda?"

Hilda's hand, when the need was over, had withdrawn from Guy's: they lay side by side now, with the backs just touching. At Mrs. Nearing's words the two sat intensely quiet, while the vision of the future, thus invoked, shone and became visible before them. They were removed for a moment, as if on an island on a magic sea, separated from the two of another generation by an expanse of beautiful years: their own. Whether Mrs. Nearing, silent, with folded hands, or Mr. Nearing, elbows on knees and jaw set, shared or not in the vision, they did not concern themselves. But Hilda, with the tears blurring her eyes as they sometimes did on communion day at church, for no reason that she could understand, found Mr. Nearing looking wistfully toward her.

"I think, Mr. Nearing, Guy ought to have his chance."

"You do?"

"Hildear!"

There was no attempt to disguise Guy's joy: it was undiluted, it faded the scruples of the others to shadowiness. Mr. Nearing brought out slowly:

"If he's got something in him, and this is the way to make the most of it, let him go. I don't want he should be hindered."

"Hoo-ray!" Guy's yell of joy was triumphant. "Oh, gee! Now you're talking! Isn't he, Hil?"

And Hilda, with her heart-strings tearing at the thought of that separation, quite as long as eternity, answered the call.

"It won't be long, Mr. Nearing."

"Then *that's* settled!" The heir of the house, perched radiant above them, had not a backward thought. Hilda remembered him long like that, hair rumpled, cheeks and eyes on fire with the stuffiness of Sunday afternoon and the heat of battle, leaning forward as if to prepare for the leap he was about to take. His eyes met hers, alight with excitement and deviltry.

"Hildare, you gotta help me off this table. I've been sick."

It was not in Hilda to refuse a call like that. But when he had her beside him, the pressure on her arm was not a feeble one.

"Hil," Guy whispered.

"Do be careful, Guy dear! There, James, that's another thing. Confining work at present would be out of the question for him."

"Sure it would!" Guy leaped past Hilda and gained the centre of the room, seeking excitement. His eye lit on the jelly mould and he seized it and set it spinning on one finger.

"Oh, you hardware!"

"Guy dear!" Mrs. Nearing was excited, but solemnly, with an intensity uncomfortable to the younger ones. "We're going to be proud of you, I know."

"Proud? Sure!" Guy, master of his kingdom, twirled the jelly mould.

"It is what I am going to look forward to, my son."

It was amazing and glorious to Hilda that Guy was untroubled. With the mould raised on high, he laughed: "Oh, you won't have to look forward long. Five or six years. What'd you like? Corporation lawyer? Inventor? Railroad man? I'll see about it. Just like that. No trouble at all, Mrs. Nearing."

"My child, I hope — !"

Guy dashed toward her and waved long legs from the arm of her chair. "Mother dear, you're awful queenly! You need a crown!"

With an arm about her he poised the jelly mould above her black hair. Mrs. Nearing's eyes on her son were very full and brilliant. With tremulous, sedate fingers, she waved away the jelly mould.

"Oh, Guy! On people's hair! Take it away from him, Hilda!"

Thus appealed to, in the little things as well as the big, Hilda advanced masterfully. Guy planted a kiss on his mother's forehead. Then he jumped from the chair and, tossing the jelly mould toward the ceiling, marched toward the door.

In the hall, it was Hilda's turn.

"Oh, Hildare!"

His arms flew round her, lightly. A lock of hair, heavier, smoother than her own, touched her forehead. In the darkened hall there was no movement but that of the grandfather clock, whirring before it struck the hour.

"Oh, Hil, aren't you *glad!*"

"Can they see?"

"No. One every time it strikes. Hildear, aren't you?"

Between the strokes of the clock and the soft, fresh kisses, Hilda answered with utter sincerity:

"Of course I'm glad."

CHAPTER III

HE was going next day.

The water was quite black, except in the middle of the river, where the tree shadows left a golden space. Thrushes sang in the trees above the bank and farther back in the meadows a cow lowed. Guy laid the paddle across the thwarts of the canoe and, with perfect disregard of Hilda's feelings on the subject, rose to arrange a pile of coats and to find himself a position crosslegged at her feet.

"Canoes aren't any place for love," he confided, rocking the boat serenely.

Guy went very fast. For Hilda, that word he had used was still cause for hesitation and a wonderful warm fear that took speech away.

"You're going to write, Guy?"

"Oh, my darling!"

"It won't be like school, will it? Time for more things than studying?"

"I don't have to study over letters."

"You don't have to study at all."

He took her hand and began to separate the fingers, squinting earnestly through them at Hilda's blue dress.

"How you love to talk about working, Hildare!"

"You do too." Hilda was earnest.

"Yeh. I love to talk about it."

It was not real, a night like this. Nothing had been real, during a fortnight when Hilda's heart had grown as big as the universe. But because she would not see him for so long, she ventured a step toward the cool, clear-cut questions of everyday life.

"Guy! Why don't you like hardware?"

"I don't know, darling." He was talking into her hair. "Because there aren't any people in it."

"People in hardware?" Hilda was humble, trying to see just what he saw.

"Of course." He looked up from the hand he was exploring, reluctant but with a spark of interest in his vivid face. "I like to talk to people. And get up things with them like the stunts at school. But Dad doesn't. He thinks the world is just made of knives and hoe blades walking around on handles."

"But d—dear—you have to think something like that when you're really working."

Guy was enraptured. "D—dear!—Hildear! That's what your name was really meant to be. Then I'm going to find some other kind of work. I don't believe you know anything about it. Oh Hil—listen, Hil darling! There's such an awful lot to do in the world. I haven't seen it all. You wait!"

More from his voice than from the words, she

understood. It had not been Hilda's habit to think of the world as big.

"The things you told me you wanted to do and the things you told your mother, are quite different."

"I can think up more. Would your ear be pinker if I kissed it?"

"Five years," Hilda's voice was quiet, "isn't very long."

"Oh, make it ten. You think I won't do anything, Hildear. Yes? Is that a nice thing for you to think?"

"Oh, Guy *dear*, I don't! And I didn't mean even to ask you except that I just like — to keep with you. You're so much brighter than I am, than anybody here. I'm glad you're the smartest in the class."

"Oh, are you, Hil?" He was laughing, but his tone was the wistful one that had called Hilda from many an engrossing occupation.

"I'm not going to have you to do things for me any more, Hildare!"

"Oh, Guy!"

Guy had taken her hands, he was leaning forward, clasping them tight in his. "You're going to have me to do things. Can you remember that? Blue Hilda!"

"I can remember."

"All this month? All next?" Guy's voice suddenly shook. "Hil! I love you!"

To repeat those words after him was a task almost too terrible, too mysterious, for Hilda's tongue: she was silent, returning the pressure of his hands with her own strong ones. Guy bowed his head on them and Hilda sat, motionless, looking down at it. The canoe was drifting, very quietly, down a wide stretch where the water slid, with little silver whirlpools, over the bottom of green moss. She heard the gentle rush of the current about an up-standing hummock, she saw the bow push aside a floating branch that followed them, bumping gently. These things were very beautiful tonight, because of her great serenity.

After a while Guy raised his head. "Why don't you kiss me?"

Hilda caught breath.

"Don't you love me enough?"

"Yes."

The canoe swerved slightly and pushed its nose against a log, stranded by the bank's edge. As they grounded, Hilda felt a spray of maple leaves brush her face.

"Enough for another?"

"Guy," the words were hard for Hilda to get out. She flushed deeply and looked down behind her screen of maple leaves. "I love you. I couldn't ever love anybody else."

There was silence. The water, coming round a bend of rocks, struck steady and loud against the

canoe and the whole light frame vibrated with it. With that, or with the beating of her own heart, Hilda vibrated too. And through her hands, tightly clasped with Guy's, the same rhythm seemed to go. Guy said, quite low:

"I couldn't either, Hil."

He knelt in the canoe and Hilda put out a quick hand to steady him. "Oh, Hil, you won't forget? . . . It's dark here, I can't see you shake your head. Put it where I can feel."

The head leaned down, frightened, sweet and hesitating.

"That was the evening church bell, Guy. It must be late."

"Oh, don't!" His cry was sharp and passionate. "Put your head back!"

"I'll tell myself it's there, tomorrow."

"Hil, I'm not going away!"

"Oh!"

The rush of emotion in that word was too great for them both. Guy, with his lips against her hair, corrected appealingly:

"— after I come back to marry you."

CHAPTER IV

"It will seem like no time, Hilda."

Mrs. Nearing, in the striped black and white muslin which she put on for supper, sat in her rocker at the top of the porch steps. She was always there in the evening and Mr. Nearing was always in the tall, green-painted rocker opposit . It was no unusual thing, either, for Hilda to be hugging her knees on the top step between them. She sat there much oftener than the son of the house.

It was cool on the Nearings' porch. Approached by a steep flight of chocolate-colored steps, it dominated Nearing Street: from behind its honeysuckle vines one looked, as from a sedate mountain height at the bungalows and the flimsy double houses that had sprung up since the great man of Cato had planted his stronghold among the daisy fields. Nearing Street basked in the dim luminosity of early evening, when the lawns showed deep dark green and the color of the wistaria blossoms was visible even in the shadow. Strolling by to evening prayer meeting, neighbors stopped to call up to the porch:

"Guy gone, Mrs. Nearing? Well, well, I expect we shall hear great things from him!"

"That's quite a boy you've got, elder! Is he going to be president of the Works when he comes back?"

Mrs. Nearing smiled at this. Hilda smiled. It was the aftermath, when the glow of vivid days spent together had not yet faded. The neighbors passed unanswered, because the future, with a height and depth and glory that no neighbor could imagine, had shone before the two that morning with Guy's last kiss.

"He looks," said Mrs. Nearing, "so like my people! The Van Wycks, Hilda. They have grandfather's portrait there."

Hilda said: "Guy was always good in rhetoricals."

"It was a grief to me," said Guy's mother, "not getting that blue tie. They didn't have any at Pierce's."

Mr. Nearing, stirring in his chair, said: "I must get that lawnmower oiled."

It was not usually the elder Nearing who mowed the lawn.

Mrs. Nearing, with her smile intense, resolved, repeated: "It will seem like no time, Hilda."

It was almost dark when the bell for prayer meeting had ceased ringing. The smell of cut grass, soft and pungent, rose from the lawns of Nearing Street. Children's voices sounded clear and high, romping in the last minutes before bedtime. The street lamps came out very slowly, far spaced between the maple trees. There was no sound within

the Nearing house, no one else to come out and disarrange the group so quiet on the porch steps.

This was the hour when one used to do lessons. It was for that Hilda had sat on these steps, all through the spring evenings, this year and many other years, waiting for Guy to come bounding round the corner of the house or down the stairs. Now she had no lessons to do. For the first time the evening chirping of the thrushes came to her ears with its mysterious sweetness. The sound of laughter behind the honeysuckle vines made her catch her breath and listen. Hilda was seventeen and summer was beginning. There were many things in the world to do which she had not yet done. She removed her hands from her knees and sat up a little straighter.

"Mr. Nearing, I have business to talk about with you."

Mr. Nearing did not talk in the evening. He had his silent post in the green rocker or, in winter, in the carpet-covered easy chair. He spread a sort of silence round him that made one's little bits of gossip fade away. He looked at Mrs. Nearing, when she moved her lovely hands, or asked a service, with an earnest, wistful expression. He watched Guy's vivid presence quite in silence. But ask him a question that could be answered in terms of hardware, and how eagerly he took it up, with what loving wealth of detail!

It was Hilda who asked these questions. Ever since earliest childhood that had been the cause of friction between Guy and herself. It was well known that if arithmetic went wrong, or geography was bewildering, Mr. Nearing could help — but it would be with illustrations about hardware.

“Now if I bought a hundredweight of steel flats, Hildare, and I wanted to make a profit of —”

At a point like this, the wriggling Guy drew pictures on the margin of the book or became absorbed in a chapter not assigned for the lesson. He was capable of keeping silence for an evening because Hilda had asked what were steel futures, Hilda found out.

“Mr. Nearing, I have business to talk about with you.”

James Nearing’s look at her was expectant, like a child to the person who has never mistreated it. There was a steady earnestness in his gray eyes not perceived until he looked straight at one.

“Business, Hildare?”

“I want,” she answered him, “to go into the Works.”

“Hilda!” It was dark: Hilda could not really see either of the other people, but Mrs. Nearing’s voice had a sharpness like resentment. “Hilda! Have you spoken to your mother?”

Hilda had. The formalities of speaking to Hilda’s mother were different from those of speaking to

Guy's, but the result in each case was the same. One went on with one's plans.

Mr. Nearing hedged: "There's a place in Bishop's law office."

The bearing of that did not need explanation. The places eligible for young ladies in Cato were in front of blackboards or behind typewriters. A typewriter at a lawyer's office was cleaner for a nice girl than a typewriter at the Cutlery Works.

"I'm not going to be a stenographer," said Hilda.

Mrs. Nearing nodded her head energetically. "The normal school course isn't long and besides it doesn't tie you just yet."

"I'm not going to be a school teacher," said Hilda.

James Nearing was regarding her with eyes screwed up: "Don't like ladylike occupations, Hildare?"

Hilda shook her head slowly. The Nearings had seen her do that before over very little things, such as the length of time the fruit preserve should cook, or whether Guy's cold was in need of quinine. It had been accepted as final. Now, when Hilda's cloudy blue eyes looked straight over the syringa bushes, under a forehead clean and undisturbed, the two older people failed to oppose her. Mrs. Nearing's slender hands clasped and unclasped a little nervously before she said:

"I had been thinking, dear, for some time — when I knew you were going to graduate — whether we

couldn't arrange for you to have a year" — the appealing kindness of her smile made up for the lameness of her statement: a statement of definite significance in Cato — "just at home. Young people, you know. And a girl is only eighteen once. I remember myself. And I am sure you would be a help to your mother. And then, who knows — "

"You were a sight more than eighteen when you married, Laura," said Mr. Nearing.

The first lady of Cato gathered her eyebrows. "I was. And I taught school, Hilda. I know. But for you —"

It was dark now. Hilda, quite unacquainted with blushes, was too untutored to be thankful that the thing that made her feel so warm and giddy was unseen by Guy's father and mother. There was a bit of paper in her hand, pushed into it out of a Pullman car window. She had no intention of revealing the contents, three words without an endearment. But they permitted her to smile softly at the idea of a year at home and a marriage in Cato.

"I don't want to stay at home," said Hilda.

Mr. Nearing nodded slowly. He always waited until the others had finished. It was his good fortune that there was, to-night, one less to have his say.

"So ye like the Works, Hilda?"

One looked at James Nearing again when he said a thing like that. There was something so young,

so earnest, so genuinely single-minded, about the middle-aged man whose likings would be supposed, long since, to have resolved themselves into opinions! His tone was that of a boy with a thing he loved.

Hilda answered him seriously. "I do. I think I should like to go into the hardware business."

"Why Hil!" James Nearing's eyes were wide with a sort of incredulous joy. It was as though he were hearing words which he knew by heart, which he had never hoped to hear spoken by anybody but himself. It was because of that, perhaps, that Hilda had courage to state her case so roundly.

"I like hardware. And if I've got to do something, I don't see why it shouldn't be the thing I know best. I know hardware like Janey Hubbell knows dressmaking because her mother's a dressmaker. I've heard Mr. Nearing tell about it ever since I was a baby. I just had to like it."

There was a dead silence. Hilda was sorry she had said that.

Mr. Nearing said, wistfully, "It ought to 'a' been good training for a boy."

Mrs. Nearing sighed impatiently. Hilda, eager and contrite both at once, tumbled in:

"It was. And I've worked things out and understood just as if I were a boy. Wouldn't you call it a start?"

"Why, if you were a boy, Hil — "

No one looked less like a boy than Hilda, in the pink gingham dress she had made one afternoon with Janey Hubbell. It was the sort of dress in which a woman waits for a man at the kitchen door after the work is done, and Hilda's eyes were the sort a man is glad to see. Mr. Nearing, perhaps, thought something like this as he watched her helplessly. But Hilda's voice was serene.

"I've been thinking about it all the year, Mr. Nearing."

"Guy never said anything about it."

"Oh, of course not, Mrs. Nearing." Obviously, such stupid things as how Hilda made a living were not to worry Guy. "And I don't like what the girls do that are stenographers and teachers."

"No one in Cato does anything else."

"I know. But I'd like to." Hilda raised her serene forehead toward the perturbed and ladylike Mrs. Nearing. "They don't seem to get anywhere."

"Do you mean to be rich?"

Certainly Mrs. Nearing did not like this. Hilda had known she would not, though she could not have explained why.

"Maybe not rich. I don't know if I care about that. I never have been. But just to do a good job. Not wait on somebody." She finished with a sudden childlike outburst: "Mr. Nearing understands."

Mr. Nearing did understand. His cheeks were

glowing in the dark quite like a boy's There was a fine craftsman's loyalty in the gladness with which he received Hilda, without a thought as to who might have come in her stead.

"That's all right, Hildare. You shall have the chance any man in the Works would have had. I'll see to it myself. I can still do that I guess. Do you want to walk down with me in the morning? Half past eight's pretty early!"

"Half past eight," said Hilda.

When she went back through the syringa hedge, she still held in her tanned fingers the three words which she kissed before she went to bed:

"Wait for me."

Hilda had her own ideas of waiting.

CHAPTER V

"You see the boys are on the job already. Early hours here!" James Nearing nodded paternally to two young fellows in shirt sleeves, dealing with a packing case in the yard of the Nearing Cutlery Works.

"Morning, boys. Boyce here?"

"Think so, Mr. Nearing."

There was a beaming kindliness in Mr. Nearing's manner as he opened the door of his own dingy brick building. He never welcomed to the chocolate-colored mansion with half such happy hospitality.

"Then I'll take you straight to Anson, Hilda. Want to?"

They entered the creaking, dusty hall, shot with shafts of sunlight, resounding with the noise of whirling from the grinding room and of steady champing from the forge shop.

"Know your way about, I guess, Hildare?"

Did Hilda know her way about! She had played hide and seek with Guy and the other children of the first grade, over every rod of the yard when it was muddy waste piled with lumber. She had

climbed, holding Mr. Nearing's big forefinger, up to the loft, she had stood for hours following the movements of Mike Moran of the forge shop. Hilda knew the Cutlery Works like her home kitchen.

The Works had not been built for convenience. The building was a long, rectangular one that frowned beneath its sprigs of ivy in the muddy vicinity of Cato's freight station. Time was, when the Cato railroad was still a one-track line, and the river, half a mile from the village, meandered into unfrequented forest, when that rectangular building was the most imposing sawmill of the countryside. The rhythm of Cato's progress subsided, then, the farms were abandoned and the sawmill left unused. And at that juncture, the young capitalist from the East, with his small fortune, his handsome wife and his eager ambitions, came to make it the cornerstone of his fortunes and to grow up with the town that was to come.

Hilda knew all about that past history. She had followed the story chapter by chapter. Perched on the arm of a rocking chair in the Nearings' back sitting room, she had watched Mr. Nearing's diagram of the old mill, of the first improvements, of the additions that were to come. Told in that simple way, it was like doll play to Hilda. She began to think that she, too, might have been capable of buying an old sawmill, partitioning off an office, bargaining for a few hundredweight of steel

and bones, haling in the farm hands from the countryside and starting to make knives.

"You've got the idea, Hildare! Just be sure your materials are all right and don't go too fast."

"Is that how to succeed?"

"That's how to make knives."

It sounded praiseworthy to Hilda, but the words fell on a room so quiet as to dampen her pleasure. They were all in the Nearings' sitting room that night, as usual on a winter evening. Mrs. Nearing, a little formal in her striped dress with the ruffles, sat turning toward the family that fine profile of hers. It was the profile of a handsome woman, almost queenly, but with something about it obscured, wistful, as though the queen had never had a chance to realize her possibilities. You understood the possibilities when you saw Guy. Mrs. Nearing laid down her crochet work at her husband's words and turned toward him a look contemplative, resigned, with just a glint of pathos in it. James Nearing shook his round shoulders nervously, but Laura said absolutely nothing.

Guy, stretched out extravagantly, with his feet beneath the table, began to try to shake the lamp by kicking it from beneath.

"I say Hil, I thought we were going to get something done to-night!"

Mr. Nearing stopped short and looked rather timidly at his son. Mrs. Nearing's face lit with

a sudden blaze of pleasure as she watched Guy's long fingers seize a handful of papers, cross out all previous work with a large gesture and start rapid figuring. Hilda left Mr. Nearing and went to Guy.

After that the conversations about hardware did not take place before the family. But they took place. You could not talk to Mr. Nearing at all except in terms of hardware. Mrs. Nearing accepted this with resigned loyalty: over and over again, with a conscientiousness that was pathetic, she asked about the two or three processes whose names she had learned. Guy accepted it and cut the Gordian knot by scarcely speaking to his father at all. Hilda accepted it and talked about hardware. And now it seemed to her that she knew hardware. She glanced about the mill.

"It's bigger. You've done a lot since I was here."

"Quite some," said Mr. Nearing shyly.

They were standing in the hall of the main building, from which the shipping room opened on one side, and the office on the other. The creaking stairs ahead of them led to the purchasing department. The building was dark, with irregular floors and small-paned windows: it had unexpected partitions and rough, make-shift doors where new departments had to be sketched in. Over everything was a fine black dust, but over everything, also, was the Cato sunlight, warm and friendly.

"Morning, elder, what's the good word?"

Mike Moran of the forge shop stamped through in his shirt sleeves. The mill was still not large: the fifty people in it were Cato men, and where two of them passed each other in the yard or in the hallway, there was a neighborly jeer or a minute's scuffle to relieve the feelings. Mike Moran and George Stenslund, his running mate of the grinding room, greeted the patron like friends and equals. They were old stand-bys, on whom James Nearing had impressed, like the law and the gospels, the making of knives as they should be made.

"'Lo, Hilda," finished Mike.

He was a friend of hers. It was long ago that he had showed her his lathe and plane and made her cognizant of what they should accomplish when well handled. She felt lonesome at seeing him slam through the door to his own little building out in the yard, while she was led relentlessly to the glass door, bearing the words: "Office. No admittance except on business."

At the office door Mr. Nearing explained. "You know Anson Boyce is our manager. I've always left the hiring of the office people to him. So, I guess it's right I should let you see him like the others."

"Of course. I didn't realize he had so much to do with it."

Down here at the Works, Hilda was seeing a new Mr. Nearing and a new atmosphere. Her friend looked a little burdened, but eager.

"Why, you see, Hil, it's been that way for quite a long time. They don't seem to understand up at the house. But you'll see all right. He does the buying and selling. I know how to *make* knives, but not the rest. You'll see."

With the prelude they entered the office, Hilda not so confident as she had been that she carried the hardware business in her pocket. The office was already full. Along its dingy expanse, heads were bowed over desks, very much as they had been at school. The desks were bigger and much more battered. No one had any books, only papers: in wire baskets, in manila folders, in piles bitten together with clips. Those papers looked important and delightful to Hilda, being typewritten in blurred purple ink, with wide margins and immense letter heads. Girls, little older than she, and young men whom she called by their first names were treating these papers like their private property, pushing them here and there, slamming them into piles, running with them from one end of the room to the other.

"We handle the orders here," explained Mr. Nearing, "and books and all that. Boyce here, fellows?"

"Right in the office, Mr. Nearing."

"Come along, Hildare."

They traversed the creaking room, Mr. Nearing's hand rattled open the glass door and drew forward the suddenly abashed Hilda.

"I've brought you a new business woman, Boyce."

Anson Boyce turned round from his desk, a desk piled quite as high as those outside with brief but apparently vital documents. He stretched an arm to bring up a straw bottomed chair, he smiled, and Hilda was reduced to wordlessness.

"Glad to see her, Mr. Nearing. Sit down."

This office was the only part of the Cutlery Works where Hilda was not at home. This man was the only one of its employees who was a stranger to her. She remembered when Anson Boyce had come to Cato, an effectual young man with quiet brown eyes: his father had the store at Huston's Corners. Boyce was not quite so young now and Cato people knew him little better than when he slipped into place as one of James Nearing's clerks. But he was manager and it was understood his word was very near law at the Works.

"Anson's got a head for putting things shipshape," had been James Nearing's report to Hilda. "And you need that when you're growing."

"Do you like him?"

"Yes, Hilda. Boyce is a good fellow. If he was my son I'd be proud of him."

They had to sheer away from that point. It was the one subject on which Hilda and Guy's father could not meet. Guy, also, had made up his young mind, and spoken it, to the effect that the poorest creature in his world and the most cowardly of

drudges, was this same Anson Boyce. His position was, in Guy's eyes, like that of the steward to the heir apparent. It had been Hilda's lot, in more than one unreasonable combat, to defend the unknown young manager. She mentally asked pardon for this presumption now. Anson Boyce was regarding her with an estimating eye.

"We can make room for another stenographer out here, Mr. Nearing. Would that be what you would like?"

Mr. Nearing smiled apologetically. Hilda had an idea that even he was losing conviction in his manager's presence.

"Well, you see, she doesn't want that, Anson."

Mr. Boyce looked distinctly taken back. Obviously diplomacy was not pleasant to him.

"She might try filing."

Mr. Nearing looked anxiously at Hilda. With a certain obstruction in her throat, she found her tongue.

"Does that give you a chance to work up, Mr. Boyce?"

Mr. Boyce considered a pencil, frowning, and did not enter into argument. "Why, they're the only positions we have for women."

"That can't be."

Hilda was quite matter-of-fact, though she did flush a little when both men looked up, one amused and the other disturbed.

"Boys," said Hilda, choosing her words, "come here out of High School. And start at the bottom somehow. And learn the business. And work up."

"Would you like to be the head of a department, Miss —"

"Hilda Plaisted, Boyce. And there's no reason in the world why she shouldn't be!"

Mr. Boyce was obviously faced with the unexpected. He seemed, however, to be a person who dealt with situations thoroughly and his next proceeding was to look searchingly at Hilda.

"Boys, Miss Plaisted" — he was polite and, to Hilda's gratitude, quite serious — "take five dollars a week; handle steel; hear swearing; get dirty. Willingness to do that is what makes us able to use them."

Hilda was sorry for her protector at this minute, Anson had so evidently voiced their common gospel. And when Mr. Nearing thought his manager was right, it was not in his creed to ask an exception, even for his particular favorite. Hilda was serious.

"I don't want to say I could load steel as well as a boy, Mr. Boyce. But I think the other things are all right. And it seems to me there ought to be something where I could have as much chance as a boy and" — she smiled confidently at him — "be paid just as little."

"There you are, Anson!"

"Stenographers are paid eight, Miss Plaisted"

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"And don't rise beyond fifteen, do they? What else may I do, Mr. Boyce?"

Anson considered. He took out a pencil and began making slow checks, one after another in a neat row. There was graven, on every line of his lean face, his objection to women protégées of employers. After a while he said, enlarging the final check: "We might make use of you in the stock room."

Mr. Nearing sighed with relief and then looked inquiringly at Hilda.

"Jimmy Doane's got the stock room, ain't he, Anson?"

"He seems to have his hands pretty full. The foremen haven't been able to get hold of the things as fast as they wanted, lately. I was going to put a boy in to help Jimmy at six dollars."

"All right," said Hilda.

Mr. Boyce favored her with another estimating look.

"Jimmy gets ten," he said. "He's had one year at High School. He's good at unloading wagons but I don't find he has much head. See how you can help him get things in order. Shall I take you to the stock room?"

"I'll do that, Anson, I'll do that!"

Mr. Nearing rose, his pleasure at Hilda's official acceptance more beaming than her own. "See you about that Saxman order later. Will you be over?"

Anson said that he would and turned to his pile of papers with the ingenuous rudeness of a man who has no time to spare.

"Anson's overworked. And he *has* got a lot on his hands. We've been growing faster than anyone expected."

"I didn't realize you had practically turned things over to him."

"Well, I've kept the factory end myself. I want things to go well, you see. And Anson seems to manage that part of it better."

She thought that the wistful explanation in Mr. Nearing's tone was a suggestion of what he would have liked to say to his wife, to his son, to all Cato, if they had been patient enough to hear him. But no one expected explanations from the proprietor of the Nearing mill, whose function was only to progress and magnify as the magnate of Cato. So, Hilda heard with vague sympathy as they walked in the July sunshine across the yard to the new corrugated-iron stock room. Her thoughts were upon it and upon the shirtsleeved figure, ripping open barrels on its doorstep. But James Nearing, before they reached it, laid his hand on her arm to say earnestly: "I needed young blood you see — now."

It was sad to Mr. Nearing, but not to Hilda. For what she saw at those words was a dark head thrust out of a train window, bound for a scene of

endeavor as wide as the world. The world is bigger than a hardware factory.

"Is that Jimmy Doane?"

"What the hell, Mr. Nearing! Mike Moran says I ought to have twenty-five gross six-thirty-twos, and I don't see where they can be anyways. This ain't them?"

Mr. Nearing was instantly on the alert. "What do you mean, Jimmy? Didn't you count 'em when they came from the station? Six-thirty-twos cost, these days."

Jimmy straightened his back, impressed but helpless. "Lord! How do, Miss Plaisted."

"Shall I look for them?" said Hilda.

Mr. Nearing smiled delightedly. "This is your new assistant, Jimmy. You needn't make her unload wagons, but I guess you can unload some work on her."

"Her!"

The word might have been a jeer or a helpless echo. Hilda said meekly: "They're brass screws, aren't they?"

"Flathead. Machine. Three-quarter inch, number six, thirty-two threads."

Jimmy evidently thought that he might at least impress his employer but he seemed without inspiration as to where the screws might be.

"Twenty-five gross would be a big box. You take the ones in that corner and I'll look under the

shelves. Have you got different places for different kinds of things?"

It was more or less evident that Jimmy had not, but Hilda did not comment further. She was aware that her father strongly objected to having it proved that he had not left his pipe in the place where he said he had left it. So she gave a smile of farewell at the departing Mr. Nearing and a smile of comradeship to the entering Jimmy.

"Gee, Miss Plaisted, you'll find it dirty here!"

It was dirty. The stock room was one large room, with a wooden floor and iron walls. A rickety, dust laden table stood in a corner; the rest of the floor space was piled with boxes. From shelves along the wall projected the ungainly shapes of various lumpy metal things. Already the place was stifling hot: it reeked with the smell of excelsior and dirty sacking.

"Mercy!" Hilda was jerking the cover from a square wooden box she had pulled forward, "We can keep it clean enough." She was always at her ease with boys when she had something to do with her hands. "Are these the ones, Jimmy?"

Jimmy was a little pacified. "Say," he said awkwardly, pulling down his sleeves, "I used to see you with your big brother at school parties, didn't I?"

"Yes. Hilda Plaisted. Will you tell me how all this works now? I'm going to be as good an assistant as I can."

When Mr. Nearing stopped by the stock room at the noon hour, he found already a semblance of order in the rough little place. The writing table was pushed forward, its blotter straightened, its papers sorted in piles. Among a medley of newly arrived packing cases Jimmy stood, hammer in hand. Hilda was on the floor with a lapful of metal things which she was blissfully fingering.

"Brass rivets, three sixty-fourths by three-eighths of an inch. Is that what the bill calls for, Hilda?"

"Twenty pounds. They've been slow in coming, haven't they?"

"Well, I guess they're all here. What's next?"

"Next is dinner. Coming with me, Hildare, or with Jimmy?"

It was the sort of joke people did not make to Hilda, but Mr. Nearing was exuberant to-day.

"I think I'll bring mine to-morrow and eat it here, if Jimmy doesn't mind. There's a lot to do. We're going to begin stock taking pretty soon."

The employer accepted the shop phrase as meat and drink: he smiled beamingly. Jimmy looked sheepish at being caught in such meek intimacy with his new subordinate but Hilda cast him a friendly smile as she edged out through the packing cases to join Mr. Nearing.

"Like it, Hildare?"

In James Nearing's tone there was something of the earnest expectancy of a child who waits for a

grown-up to share his delight in a Christmas toy. But he had no disappointment to accept.

"Oh *yes*, Mr. Nearing! What do they use brass rivets three sixty-fourths by three-eighths of an inch for?"

CHAPTER VI

Hil — darling!

This train is awfully long! If you got excited, you could walk over people's feet, down a green velvet aisle, most of the way back to Cato. Not all the way back, darling. If you could, I'd come.

Listen, Hil, you're not to go down to the river bank. Do you understand? That's our place. If I thought of you there this summer with Otto Marks or Joe Byers, I'd die! We're going past lots of rivers now, every now and then a little green, slidey one. I pretend that they all belong to us — that it's a world of rivers and I'm going through it looking for places where we will come.

Do you love me, Hildare? Gee, I've got to know!

Excuse haste. I forgot to mail this when I got to New York because there was such a hustle. Uncle Andrew met me and we stayed here two days. Oh, Hil, swell! Can't write any more now, we're going to the theatre to-night and to-morrow we're going up to Uncle Andrew's place.

Mine Hil? Love you.

GUY

The note was inside Hilda's blouse when she stepped into the stock room on her first full work-day. Due to its alchemy she approached her superior unembarrassed.

"Hello, Jimmy."

"Hello, Hilda."

"Want me to get those things that came last night?"

"Yeh. Will you?"

While she stood on a packing case, bringing a housewife's order among the shelves, she was aware of the stock room, but aware of it as the centre of a world, luminous and immense. New York, Uncle Andrew's place — unknown! and college, a still further unknown! One of the first real pains of love came to Hilda, different from the pain of vanished kisses, for that, at seventeen, is half a pleasure: the world of Guy's thoughts was no longer her world.

Jimmy, rummaging among shelves and packing cases, with a bar of sunlight falling across his sandy head and lusty bent back, addressed her: "Would you label all these kinds of screws separate, Hilda? We ain't got much of any but the brass ones."

"I'll make the labels, Jimmy, shall I?" answered Hilda, and meantime her ranging thoughts were wondering: "Perhaps Guy will be a lawyer. But then he wouldn't live in Cato."

"I never did like this writin' and countin' business much." Jimmy pushed a pile of papers toward her with relief.

"I think I can help with that."

She pulled a chair to the desk and took up the rusty pen. As she scratched along she thought: "Everybody in Cato knows as much about New York as I do. But I can read. Suppose Guy should find some new career that I never heard of!"

And that in the end was what happened.

The next morning, at half past eight, Hilda hung her hat behind a shelf in the stock room as if she had been doing it all her life.

So, from one day to the next, her world shifted from the white-plastered schoolroom and the vine-covered porches and the maple-shaded streets of Cato and became a stretch of sunbaked yard where the flies buzzed in the June sunlight and the sound of machines burdened the air. She thought about tenpenny nails and it was morning, and she thought about cleaned bone for knife handles and it was night. And in all the little intervals she thought about Guy. It seemed to Hilda that she and he had started on two parallel roads that ran far apart, just within hailing distance. She had no time to look ahead on her road, or behind, only when she stopped, just for a minute, tingling and satisfied, it was nice to wave her hand to the boy over on the other road, still within sight.

There was a rapid pulsation about all his letters. He was like an engine running at full speed.

How'd you like me to be in the diplomatic service? There's a peach of a fellow here that is. It's a slick job and all you have to do is be nice to people.

What about organization? There's a bird here not much older than me that got up a whole company.

Hilda was awed. To her there were no careers but doctor, lawyer, minister and the Cutlery Works. She was not sure that being nice to people or getting up things, admittedly accomplishments of Guy's, ought to be considered as money-making assets. In Cato they were allowed to be pleasant accessories, but too much of them was not normal. The main thing was the day's work.

But she expressed no doubts to Guy, only humility. Her letters were long, because Guy had asked that they be, and correct and involved because they were so shy. Guy laughed about them.

Honey! Aren't you pernickety, talking about my chances for fuller development and all that! I just organized the High School class for fun, if you call that getting ready for a great future.

And by the next mail:

Hil-darling, Hil-dear, Hil-sweet, I can't stay away from you. I thought about it all last night. What's the use of being so young, Hil! I'd like to

have you now — in a car, like the people have here, and one of those houses with big white verandas behind box hedges where you run into the city for the theatre. Then you'd be mine and I'd wait on you all the time, Sweetheart!

None of the people who watched Hilda walk to work the next morning, in a dark blue dimity made at home and rather too full at the back, with the "V" of the neck cut just too high, realized what an immortally wise person they saw. For Hilda, as for all women who come into their heritage, streets and cities and people had disappeared like midges from a burning planet. She was gasping, like a person drowning under deep water, and awed like one waking in a world-wide desert, lit by stars. Guy had spoken of living in the same house with her all their lives, and the words were before her on paper.

A sacred silence descended on them after that. Guy did not write and Hilda, with her blouse creased by the heat, her hair in dusty wisps, climbed about the stock room.

"Fifty pieces of flats, three fourths by one eighth, fifteen feet long. Got that, Hil?"

"Yes. What is a flat, Jimmy?"

"Piece of steel. Twenty gross inch-and-a-quarter number six round-headed blued-wood screws. Let's see — we had that —"

"Does all this go down on separate pieces of paper, Jimmy?"

"Yeh. Then we copy it in a book. I know I had them screws before."

"How often do we do this?"

"Twice a year. Gee, them screws —"

"But you must lose track of a lot in between times."

"Aw — !" Such exclamations went without comment by this time. "How can you keep track of such a lot of stuff! I got it in my head all right."

Hilda wrote silently. "Would you mind if I tried to fix up a system, Jimmy? When there is time?"

"You know the names of all this junk, do you?"

"Well, I guess I'm learning."

"Oh, go to it."

Hilda went to it, having decided some time ago that the matter was very like housekeeping. Housekeeping is simple if you have a place for all your utensils and put them back there when you have used them. It may seem difficult, at first, to keep track of several hundredweight of steel instead of a dozen teaspoons, but that is when you are old and find changing worlds an effort. Hilda came back from the main office with several gross of filing cards and explained her idea to Jimmy.

"A card for each article. Mark the amounts every day as things come in and out. Then we'll always know exactly how much we have."

"All right if you'll do it, Hil. I'll keep to the man's work — shag the iron and jaw the freight agent. You do the writin' and figurin'. All right?"

"Of course it's all right, Jimmy. I don't believe there's anybody in the place that can manage a freight agent better than you can."

That was how Hilda began to learn the inmost nature of steel and iron and bone. While she kept her mind serenely to it, the summer rolled to its zenith. On the Saturday afternoons, which she spent alone in the stock room, making acquaintance in proprietary solitude with bars of steel and bags of bones, the boys and girls went laughing to the river and Hilda did not know it. And in the evenings when she walked home late from the Works, thinking, with real excitement, of a new way to simplify her records, she saw a veranda crowded with dark forms, heard the notes of a mandolin or a phonograph and was not stirred. She did not even feel lonely. She had time only for her own work — and for the other more glorious runner on the distant road.

The blazing August days shortened and clouded; the very first maples on Nearing Street showed golden leaves. One day her mother spoke of getting the children's dresses ready for school.

"Is it September?"

"Gee, you keep your eyes open down to the factory!"

"Guy will be starting for college."

Any family eruption could be awed into silence by the mention of Guy. His trailing clouds of glory still shimmered in the sight of Cato. The sleeping ambitions, the wistful desires, of every boy in the town were embodied in the lot of Guy Nearing.

"Has he written lately, Hil?"

"Not very lately."

She had made ready for this, but it was hard to bear, the barren lapse when Guy was busy and could not put his mind on writing. There was just one dazzling surprise in the midst of it, a post card of an old gray dormitory against green grass. With the sign they used for kisses. That was the last message from the Guy who belonged entirely to Hilda.

I'm in Larrabee Hall, Hil. The next letter, when it came, was circumstantial. It assumed an immense knowledge on Hilda's part. It gave the names of subjects, books, professors (hereinafter to be called "profs" without warning to Hilda), classmates, buildings, the streets of the town. Hilda skimmed the letter for endearing words: Guy had had no room for them among the information. Then she put it away among the most treasured of all, whose terms were to be learned by heart. Now Guy had begun.

She felt a little breathless after that, with the impact of the letters. They came like blows, each

with so much information to accept. Guy vibrated with the activity of the new life, and Hilda's smile as she read the letters, too intent for lovemaking, was almost maternal. It was so right for Guy to have a chance like this: a start cut off from old things. She no longer dared picture the final goal, and struggled merely to keep him in sight.

Do you know, Hil — This was one of the most cherished letters, cherished because it spoke, not of love, nor of Hilda, but of Guy in one of those unguarded, boyishly confiding moments, which are a woman's dearest proof of affection. Do you know, Hil, I believe Dad's got the idea of work all wrong. He doesn't think people ought to be happy when they work — just to get something done. I honestly don't see what difference it makes how many knives there are in the world. But think of eight hours a day, maybe ten, in that dump of a place! It is a dump, you know, dirty rooms, smutty windows, people that can't talk about anything interesting. And there's Europe and all waiting to be seen —

Hilda's heart contracted at that mention of Europe. The word had not occurred in Guy's letters before, but she knew, as well as she would have known had she seen him with another girl on the street, that it meant something fatal for her. She resigned herself at that moment, though it was months before the word recurred. And in some flash of understanding, almost a miracle, so foreign

was it to her own nature, she tried to see why Guy found eight hours a day at the Cutlery Works ugly.

"Mrs. Nearing, have you ever thought of Guy's being an artist?" She tried to propose the subversive thought gently to Guy's mother, but Mrs. Nearing took her hand, eyes shining.

"Oh, yes, Hilda, I have thought."

"He — he never painted, or anything."

"It's the temperament." Mrs. Nearing, breathless as a girl at some wild, forbidden extravagance, ventured: "My people, the Van Wycks, were always like that. And Guy has the long hands."

"I'm sure," admitted the puzzled Hilda, "I don't know who there is but artists who work for fun."

"Oh, Hilda, that confining work at the Cutlery would never do for Guy. I've always known it. Though with his organizing ability and popularity —! I don't know, I'm sure."

Neither did Hilda know. She felt that the horizons of her ordinary world had cracked open: in the new, dazzling vistas, she could hardly see clearly. But, watching Guy's mother's wrapt look, a look of childlike longing as well as protection, Hilda, without Mrs. Nearing's wings of fantasy and with all the knowledge of sober facts which the older woman did not have, Hilda followed her every step of the way.

"If he wants to be an artist, Mrs. Nearing, of course he must."

"I knew you'd agree with me, my dear."

The thought of added vistas, which meant added patience for her, kept Hilda steady through the uneven flow of Guy's letters, which sometimes flooded upon her three times a week and sometimes subsided to a line or two, casual and dear in their perfect reliance on her interest.

Working like time, Hil. Love.

Got the grippe. Wish you were here.

And then an astounding array of exploits in which Guy had been elected president of this or that mysterious body, Guy had organized a club, Guy had got into a desirable "set" — not bunch. Hilda was awed by the news and Mrs. Nearing ecstatic.

"You don't say Guy isn't showing ability," she challenged her husband once when Hilda sat at their feet on the porch steps.

A queer expression passed across Mr. Nearing's face, hastily restrained. Whether it was pride, envy, or displeasure, Hilda was not sure.

"If *that's* what you call ability!" said Guy's father.

Hilda did not take her letters to the Works. She knew now that they would be her most secret treasure for years, and they might get crumpled. They were in her top bureau drawer, in the white satin glove box painted with pansies, which had marked the maturity of her fifteenth birthday. Beside them lay the little turquoise ring that came

at Christmas time before Guy acquired some obscure scorn of turquoise rings, and the odd pearl pendant that came later. They were riches enough for Hilda. They sufficed to make loneliness impossible in the winter evenings when the family were in bed or at prayer meeting and Hilda, after a warmed-up supper, sat alone beside her oak bureau with the scarf embroidered with pansies and the photographs of Guy.

She lost the thread of his new vision of beauty, there were so many other beauties. Guy, in comparison with her, seemed very young. The world seemed to have stopped for him, to taste and enjoy. Tears, almost maternal, came to Hilda's eyes. His enthusiasm was so heartwhole, his absorption so complete. Meantime, her new system in the stock room was fairly well installed.

It took the Works a little time to get used to Hilda. It was many a day before the fact that the neat blue serge below her waist was in the form of a skirt rather than trousers and that the crinkly brown hair at the back of her neck was knotted rather than short cropped had ceased to appall and irritate her fellow workers. But people can become used to an extraordinary number of things. The time arrived, even as it would have arrived, had Hilda been a hump-backed witch or a diamond-crowned princess, when Stenslund put his head in at the door to ask for bone and had attention for

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nothing in the world but bone. Hilda supplied it. She was a perfectly working part of the machine.

"What do you think you're doin', Hilder, playin' doll's house with them screws?" Mike Moran, in his shirtsleeves, stood puffing in the doorway.

"Of course I'm keeping house, Mike. What'll you have?"

The foreman of the forge shop grinned tolerantly. Then he reverted to business and addressed himself to Hilda's superior.

"Say, you young son of a blankety blank blank, where's them steel flats that was ordered three weeks ago? Can I make knives out of old pins, or pfwhat is it?"

"I gave you the steel."

"Aw, h ——! do you call that steel! Say, excuse me, Miss Plaisted."

"All right, Mike. What was the matter with the steel?"

"Matter! Holy ——! Oh, all right then, I can't be thinking about them things when I'm talking business. Why, that wasn't no steel, Miss Plaisted. Burn my hide if it wouldn't split in your hand like celery! What this mutt is thinkin' of not to look at what they put over on him when it hits the stock room ——!"

"We ought to write to the shipper and say it's bad then, oughtn't we?"

"And who's to do it! There ain't no organnyza-

tion here. If this poor simp was to look at steel he wouldn't see much more than the puddin' his head is made of."

"Say, Mike, any time you want your features altered —"

"Will you show me what's the matter, Mike? I've seen a lot of steel. Then I can report it better to the purchasing agent."

Mike, brought up short, favored Hilda with a sour glare. Then: "Well, I s'pose you do know the look of it, playin' around here so many years. Come on, Hilder."

There followed Hilda's faded blue dimity back, an envious and respectful look on the part of Jimmy Doane. But it soon melted from that good natured face and Jimmy went on with the tune he was whistling. It was the beginning of the process by which, in course of time, Hilda discharged her boss.

"Say, Hil, is ten dollars a week awful little for a feller my age?"

"Why, Jimmy! I don't know."

"You go ahead darn slow here."

"Mr. Nearing's conservative."

"'T this rate I won't be boss of the Works very soon."

An astounding thought as to Jimmy's intentions flashed through Hilda's mind, but she labelled in silence. From the door Mike Moran cast her the smile of a genial and humorous patron saint.

"That Guy Nearing, now!" burst out Jimmy. "Gee! I'd like to be in his shoes! Don't have to work a stroke and he'll be boss of the whole joint as soon as he comes home."

"If that young blatherskite was to do a stroke of work once in his life it wouldn't hurt him." Mike, in privileged character of James Nearing's pioneer foreman, contributed to the conversation. "That ain't the way his pa got to be boss."

"Guy Nearing was the brightest boy in school."

"Sure, Hilda. But work's gotta be learned." Mike, who had provided both Guy and Hilda with steel shavings for playthings once upon a time, retained his stand. "Well, Jimmy, all I can tell you is you'll work a long time in a stock room before ye'll be earning the money to talk up to Mr. Guy Nearing."

"Oh, sure," said Jimmy gruffly, "I'm settled anyway. Hil, I'm going. I'm no great shucks at this business without the writing. Mike's going to take me on."

"Oh, Jimmy, I'm glad. But—"

Mike grinned. "Sure ye can do it. Any kid of fifteen can roll the boxes for ye. Don't let 'em put it over on ye, Hilder."

So Hilda, with her retiring superior's blessing, went to Anson Boyce.

"You say you've been doing all the clerical work and keeping the inventory?"

"I've started a card system, Mr. Boyce. It really goes very easily."

"Card system. Hm." Boyce stared at the cracked and peeling edge of his desk. "Your idea?"

"Since the stock taking. We know now just what material there is on any given day."

"Hm. I intend to give you a fair deal, Miss Plaisted." (Poor Boyce! No condemned man inviting the rack could have looked more grim.) Hilda had an absurd desire to assure him tearfully:

"It isn't important, really. It doesn't take any brains. Don't be alarmed."

"This is your idea. You may go ahead with it. We needed something of the sort. You will be listed as temporary stock clerk. Nine dollars."

There is something about coming out of the boss's office after a successful interview like emerging on the world after rebirth. Everything looks fresh, different, one has leisure to absorb it in a new lease of life. Hilda, beaming her happiness on the grimy hall, bumped full into Mr. Nearing.

"How's the stock room, Hildare?"

"Oh, Mr. Nearing, shall I tell you?"

They stopped by the window, open on the muddy yard where the sparrows hopped. Mr. Nearing, his hair rumped, a streak of grime across his collar, heard her exultant.

"The boss of the stock room and a boy to order around! Put it right up to old Anson and didn't

need me at all! That's the ticket, Hil, I'm proud of you."

He *was* proud. The hand that grasped her sleeve was shaking. Hilda was embarrassed for a moment, suddenly moved. "It's — nothing."

"It's fine. I'm glad to see you getting along like this. Work does it, Hil. It's what I always hoped —"

Suddenly the proprietor of the Works said no more. They turned toward the door in silence.

"Mrs. Nearing says — Guy won't be coming home right after commencement. He has an invitation somewhere."

"Seems like it, Hil."

"I'm glad —"

Mr. Nearing scratched his head resignedly. "Yes. It's all right. Guy's crazy to travel. Like his mother says, there ain't no reason why not —"

Hilda's heart sank — sank to where she could not remember that she had ever been to the boss's office or come forth again on a new world.

"Travel! Mr. Nearing — do you mean Europe?"

"Why — it seems these college boys do that sort of thing. His mother's fixing it."

It was May and the dandelions grew in Cato yards. Hilda, walking home and drinking in unconsciously the sweetness of the air and the quiet of the maple-shaded streets, realized that the sky was very blue above the tree-tops and the shingled houses, and

that violets showed purple about the big elm tree at the corner of Nearing Street. She realized it because they had grown there last year when she and Guy were planning for the High School dance.

On the Plaisted porch, the whole family sat rocking in the late sunshine. Jim, swinging his legs from the railing, was announcing: "I'm going to take Jessie Bownes."

"To what, Jimmy?"

"My land, Hil, but you're a live one! Maybe they don't know down at the shop that next month's the High School dance."

The High School dance! She paused, outlined against the pale sunset of the May afternoon, Hilda, in her dark dress and sailor hat, her eyes sober with the memory of shelves and figures. "Oh," said Hilda.

"You're going to cut it, I suppose, Hildare? I haven't heard you say anything about it."

"Why — yes. I don't know many people now. I expect I shouldn't have much fun."

No one urged Hilda. Going to a dance without a partner was too well known a form of torture. She herself forgot the dance. Even on that last June night she had forgotten it — the night when Nearing Street was full of gentle murmurs and hurrying footsteps, when Jim went slamming through the house at half-past seven to hearten himself by a moment or two with the fellows, before he called

for Jessie, when Gertie Fowler passed laughing under her tan cloak, with a white bow on her hair, when Gertie's mother called from the front porch with proud expectancy: "Have a good time, dear!"

Hilda, serenely putting away the silver while her mother washed out the dishcloth, turned to look after Gertie. A new moon stood over the end of Nearing Street. And June was the syringas' blossoming time.

"I sort of wish you were going to the dance, Hilda."

"I don't believe I do, Mother. I have enough to keep me happy."

Mr. Plaisted was at the store that night and Mrs. Plaisted chose to sit upstairs with Dorrie who had a cold. Hilda, her skirt binding sewed up and the hook she had lost that day replaced, stood at the door and breathed the syringas. It was not of the dance she was thinking: to her sweet reasonableness those things were all as they must be. It was right that her road was a long and humble one and that Guy in his distant triumph had become almost invisible. But as she stood at the door, in the light only of the street lamp and the new moon, her eyes took on that blue depth that made her look as though another soul beside her own had entered into her, filling her body with invincible power.

Quite still she stood there, her hands at her sides and her eyes quiet. But when she moved, it was

not to take a wild, secret flight to the riverbank. Hilda went into the house again, closed the front door and went upstairs. Hilda was not a person who prayed. For her, daily life seemed to take the place of that. But she stood at her window with her mouth soft and her hands earnestly clasped. It was the window that looked toward the square, chocolate-colored mansion.

CHAPTER VII

"MISS PLAISTED!"

Smythe, the office manager of the purchasing department, came fluttering out through the glass door that led to the inner office, whither he motioned Hilda. Hilda, at the third of the double row of desks down the room, looked up.

"The boss is with him. You know?"

"Yes, Mr. Smythe."

The occupants of all the other desks looked up as Hilda rose. She was surprisingly little different from the Hilda who had entered the stock room six years ago: a little taller, a little more confident, a little soberer all together. Her crinkly hair still swept to the back of her head in the golden brown knot which caught the afternoon sun. Her blue serge dress was a little more careful and expensive, but her blue eyes had the old look, serene and single hearted, though their shadows had grown unduly wise.

"I bet Boyce'll give it to her."

"It's her turn for a call down."

"Witmer's been listening to her entirely too much lately."

The whispers followed Hilda's vigorous young back as she set a weight on the orderly pile of letters on her desk and went toward the purchasing agent's office.

"Oh. Hm. Here you are."

Witmer, the purchasing agent, an importation to the Works only a few years ago, was leaning back at the roll top desk, dangling a foot and twisting his lips with their little, rope-colored mustache. By the side of the desk, dark, calm and motionless, sat Anson Boyce. Hilda pulled up a chair.

"You've been in this department how many years, Miss Plaisted?"

"Four, Mr. Boyce. Since I left the stock room."

"Ever since I came, in fact. Miss Plaisted and I have more or less built up this department together, eh?"

"I've always had charge of the follow-up letters. And then of the files."

"I remember. You had to have some one to dictate to because you — er — wouldn't learn the typewriter. Have you got your new tabulating system installed here pretty well?"

"I think so. We've had it a year."

Witmer nodded, Boyce made checks. Hilda, glancing at some of the figures before the two men, perceived that they had been in conference about something more immediate than the tabulating system of the purchasing department. She glanced

quietly at the paper under Witmer's nervous hand and sat still.

"We're loaded up on steel," said Boyce.

"I did it."

Witmer, Hilda's chief, shifted uneasily, Boyce moved round to look at her. There had never been any special kindness in the brief looks cast by Anson Boyce on Hilda Plaisted. She knew quite well that the manager felt no liking for the girl who had forced herself into his stock room and later, by somewhat the same process, into his purchasing department. But whenever she had done well, he had said so and through these years of association, intimate though impersonal, she had come to have an unexpressed liking for the silent, wooden-faced man, about whom the hands all agreed: "Well, Boyce is fair, anyhow."

"You did? Will you tell us why, Miss Plaisted?"

Witmer, her explosive young chief, to whose ambitions, whose problems and whose babies Hilda had been a sympathetic listener, tried to divert this catechism.

"Well, naturally, I made the final purchase, Boyce."

"On Miss Plaisted's suggestion?"

"Certainly," said Hilda.

Boyce again cast her an estimating look from his brown eyes. "Would you mind telling us on just what evidence you advised it, Miss Plaisted?"

Hilda's serene blue eyes did not waver. She looked very young between the two worried men. Somehow, in spite of the trimness of her appearance, any room in which Hilda sat came to have a home-like tranquillity.

"An intuition, Mr. Boyce."

"A what!"

"I judged by the look of the travelling man."

"She knows 'em all," put in Witmer. "None of 'em will miss passing the time of day if they find a lady in the office."

"And he looked — how, may I ask?" It was hard to tell whether Boyce was angry or not. His lips were pursed as he waited for her answer.

"He looked as usual. It was simply that he had always been anxious to sell, and one day, he was not. So, I drew conclusions."

"And told Witmer that because a drummer had seemed a little offish to a lady clerk, he had better spend several thousand dollars on steel?"

Boyce was within his rights and Hilda had no license to get angry, but she spoke crisply. "I employed a little brains beside, Mr. Boyce. I checked up my suspicions by the trade journals."

"You read them?"

"Certainly. I found there were new railroad projects and increased automobile production. That's plain enough."

"Rising price of steel?"

"Naturally." Hilda smiled at the manager with the confidence of one expert toward another. "Besides, I knew my man."

"I see. The place of feminine intuition in business. I had," admitted Boyce, "noticed the railroad and automobile symptoms myself. But," he checked her brusquely, "we have heard nothing all winter of rising steel prices."

"Suppose you call up Milwaukee, Mr. Boyce, and find out. I will abide by the result."

A certain crisp, instantaneous smile passed over Boyce's face. "It is not necessary, Miss Plaisted. I have a letter here from the Brownson Company, our largest shippers. They offer steel at four and a half cents higher than we've been paying. And they warn us to stock up now, because it is going up."

A girlish relief passed over Hilda's face. She smiled, Witmer smiled, even Boyce emitted a quick kindly glance.

"I just wanted to know what your art of prophecy was, Miss Plaisted. Witmer admitted to being at a loss.

"You'll get that thirty-five a week now, Miss Plaisted. Would have before, if you'd been a man. You've earned it."

Boyce regarded her speculatively and Hilda was caught by the keen intentness of the manager's face when he was really at ease. "A woman assistant

to the purchasing agent is a novelty, but I do not see that, if a woman has what we want, she should be debarred."

Vibrating with the exhilaration of her first real step into success, Hilda went out through the glass door.

They were already putting on their hats in the outer office. The whirl of the machines had ceased, out in the yard the stream of bobbing heads poured, eager, toward the gate.

"It was all right, wasn't it, Hilda?" Smythe, the Sunday School superintendent, an office boy at the Works the year he finished school, smiled up at the girl without envy. "I knew Anson couldn't have much against you. He's fair, Anson is."

Hilda had at last the sanction of the chief of the Works. She did not know how early in her career her ambition had switched from satisfying James Nearing to satisfying Anson Boyce. Perhaps it came about when she realized that Mr. Nearing himself watched for the approval of his manager. They had many talks during the walks home in the evenings when Hilda was no longer an employee but a neighbor. She was experienced enough now to understand the business story that Mr. Nearing poured out insatiably, evening by evening, of the growth of the Works from a tiny business without books, without system, carried about quite literally, in the proprietor's pocket, to the modern thriving

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concern that furnished employment to all the countryside around Cato.

She understood that this expansion had been supervised by Anson Boyce.

"I understand how to make knives, Hil. And good ones. But there's more to it. Buying and selling. Budgets. Costs department. It's too big for one man."

"That was where you needed — some one younger?"

Mr. Nearing, after this question of Hilda's, had been silent for several moments and then remarked: "Guy wa'n't old enough when I first took Anson on. And, like he says, it wa'n't interesting work. Not for a young boy. And like his mother says, I had money enough to give him something else."

It was said with unembittered humility. Hearing it, Hilda realized that perhaps the proprietor of the Works knew what was murmured about him here and there; that perhaps Mrs. Nearing, with her attitude of royal patience, perhaps Guy, with his careless patronage, were within their rights toward the head of the family. Perhaps Anson Boyce was right in assuming the chief responsibility at the Works. The dwindling of Mr. Nearing's titanic figure marked the real end of her childhood. So she was able to advise him sanely when, several years ago, he had broached the fact: "They say maybe it's a good thing to incorporate, Hil. Get a lot of people

together so I wouldn't be the sole owner. We could get money easier that way and" — helplessly — "we're growing."

"And the state's growing. It's your great chance."

"Yes. I suppose so. It would be called the Cato Cutlery Works. Goes nice, doesn't it?"

"Not Nearing's any more?"

"It doesn't — really matter, Hil."

So the Cato Cutlery Works had been incorporated, Anson Boyce was made clerk and Hilda was given a share of stock. And now, as she put on her sailor hat to go home, she saw in the flyspecked mirror behind the door the face of the new assistant to the purchasing agent.

"Yes," she told Smythe, "it was all right."

She followed the others down the creaking stairs, and out into the yard with its mud and its few dandelions in the grass behind the gate. Every one was out on the streets of Cato to-night. From Bartlett's drug store the school girls poured out, late for supper and laughing in tremulous bursts. Along Maple Street and Hawthorne Street, the front doors stood open, sometimes children played on the steps, or a girl stood, busy with the trellis and the budding vines, to glance up vividly at a group of boys who passed and dared a shy greeting.

Every night, for six springs, Hilda had seen these things, as she passed on her own homeward way, with dusty hair and creased skirt and a blouse

drooping under the hard wear of the office. The pang that she felt had always been a very faint and concealed one. She did not want, in her pre-occupied and office-worn state, to face the groups of boys and stand on her merits. And she knew well that if she was absent from these porch and pavement gatherings that she would not be remembered when the couples were made up for the Saturday picnic on the river, and when the boys waited at the door to intercept the girl with whom they had arranged to walk home from prayer meeting.

She was well content. There had been one sacred year, long ago, when she passed the boys, wrapt and unseeing, because they were not like Guy. And after that, when, so gently and so inevitably that the pain was never sharp, Guy receded from her horizon, she had still not cared for the boys who were his inferiors. Hilda guessed, dimly, now that gray time was past, how Jane and Elsie and the boys of her set had looked after her with puzzled regret. "Hil Plaisted's getting to be a stick. Never jolly and always thinking about the Works."

Thanks to the Works, that abysmal time had passed. Hilda did not know how fortunate she was to have her first hard blow when she was young enough to have vigor left for work and curiosity to keep her still alive. It was when she knew that Guy would always find some new interest to keep him from Cato, that the new purchasing department

was instituted and Hilda made herself a place in it. That year, when she was twenty, was the year which had seemed to Hilda to carry her into the heart of knowledge far beyond any mother in Cato. For, that year, she took the satin box of letters out of her bureau drawer and put it away. That year the shadows of yearning and loneliness left her eyes and serenity came back. She even smelled the syringa hedge without any change of expression other than a far away gentleness.

"I still love him," said Hilda. "It is not his fault."

Nor was it Hilda's fault if, even yet, the immense tenderness in her heart would open to no one but Guy, if the suffering and need of any one else would have seemed merely one of life's incidents, but suffering on the part of Guy something to shake the world. She hardly knew this herself, because Guy did not suffer and no one spoke to her of him. It was not her fault, nor even with her knowledge, that the single voice of her being still willed, unquestioned: "I wait."

Hilda had a standing of her own now. She was no longer "the little Plaisted girl who does something at the Works." She was Miss Plaisted of the Purchasing department, who had a new hat every season and made more than a stenographer and as much as a school teacher. If you made as much as that in Cato, you were not called on to marry. So Hilda was respected. But it was with a little pang, in

the moment of her triumph, that she answered Janey Marks' hail to-night on the corner of Nearing Street.

"My dear, I'm so late for getting supper! But I couldn't get downtown before. Baby's been a little fiend. Teething, you know. Look at Aunt Hilda, Otto baby."

"He's really sweet, Janey."

"Honestly, isn't he, Hil. And I don't mind having the oldest a girl: she'll be so useful taking care of him."

"You'll let me take them some Saturday?"

"Angel girl! Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. They say Guy Nearing's coming back."

With her last year's spring coat streaming behind her, Janey was off up the street, toward the double house where she and Otto lived. Hilda, her face showing white in the twilight, walked on. She nearly ran into a group of girls who rushed down the steps of one of the houses.

"Good-bye then, meany. I know why *you* have to race home and dress for to-night!"

"Aren't you smart! When someone's been paying exactly as much attention to you!"

"Oh wait, girls, what about Saturday? Is everybody having a new dress? I'm not, I warn you. Oh, hello, Hilda."

Hilda did not know why, after the years of serene aloofness, she felt abashed by the girls' chatter of

things in which she had no part. With a little smile from eyes which looked unusually dark, she was passing on. But Elsie Rice, now Elsie Bauerman, detached herself, a brilliant foreign visitor from the group of younger girls who hung admiringly about her.

"I suppose you're interested in all this preparation, Hil. Have you heard Guy Nearing's to be in town?"

"Is he?"

"Mr. Bauerman met him on the *Mauretania*. They landed last week."

As Hilda turned away from the group there was, perhaps due to the influence of Elsie Bauerman, a renewed criticism in their eyes. "She is sort of a stick."

The Plaisteds finished supper early. They were a small family now, for Bob was married and Jim was away at college. Mr. Plaisted pushed back his chair at seven and went down to the store which always kept open on Wednesday nights. Mrs. Plaisted went upstairs to finish Dorrie's first party dress. Hilda, according to a habit that had become safe through years of commonplace use, drifted to the Nearings' porch.

"Is that you, Hilda? I've been so anxious for you." Mrs. Nearing was alone in the rocker at the top of the steps, wrapped in her white shawl with the lavender border. "My dear, he's coming."

"I heard."

They sat in silence in the deepening spring twilight, Mrs. Nearing ghostlike in her rocker and Hilda warm, solid and unnaturally still, on the steps at her feet.

"I don't suppose it will be for good; though — his father wants it."

"Will he," Hilda's voice was like that of a school girl, "will he give up painting, Mrs. Nearing?"

"Well, I think — as a profession." Mrs. Nearing, in speaking about these things strange to Cato, had a remote, mysterious tone. But in the dark, along with the creak of her rocker, Hilda heard a certain wistfulness in her voice. "Of course he only took it up as a means of general culture, during this year or two since college. I was never sure myself it would prove his real life work."

"Two years is — not much."

"Oh, no, Hilda. That's what I tell Mr. Nearing. Give the boy a chance. Guy is so brilliant, Hilda, in such an unusual, all-round way. It's no wonder it's hard for him to settle immediately on the thing he can do best."

Hilda nodded. There was no shyness about her approach to this subject, the single subject of every evening on the Nearings' porch. Too often the two women had sat here together, Mrs. Nearing in her rocker, Hilda at her feet, to discuss every letter, every word of Guy's. There was no difference in

their eagerness, none in their whole-hearted happiness when Guy was happy. They had only one letter between them and it was addressed to Mrs. Nearing, but they devoured it like two mothers.

"Does he say what he thinks of next?"

"He talks of various plans. A ranch with some friends. But I want him to come home and rest."

"I think he must miss you, Mrs. Nearing."

The older woman's eyes shone secretly in the dark. "I think he does, Hilda. Guy and I have always been very close."

There was a childlike exultation in her tone. This thing was unacknowledged between the two, yet they allowed for it. They allowed for the fact that, as Hilda advanced in the business world, leaving Guy's mother still seated on the porch where she had sat when she first came as a bride to Cato, as Hilda's little triumphs succeeded one another, there came to Mrs. Nearing other triumphs: the letters with "Yours lovingly" scrawled across the bottom, the photographs inscribed "To my dearest, Guy." Fortified by these things, Mrs. Nearing watched her own gray hairs thicken; she watched the girl she had seen born become a personage in Cato.

"I have begged him to come home to see me."

There was a long pause.

"Guy doesn't like Cato."

"I have never thought," said Mrs. Nearing, "that

I must teach him to like it. For me, it was different. My place was with my husband — ”

It was strange how little it had entered even Hilda's head that Mrs. Nearing felt herself to be enduring exile. But she paused wistfully after these words and Hilda felt in her attitude some childlike longing to confide. She seemed to have forgotten, to-night, that it was only on one subject she and Hilda had been intimate, and lapsed into confession toward the woman who had so imperceptibly grown to be her equal.

“You know, Hilda, I always supposed when we came here that it wouldn't be long. My people, I know, expected it. Mr. Nearing wanted to start in a new country. I understood, of course; but starting a factory — ” she waved her hand vaguely, “of course it must be small at first, but after a while a man gets into the rush of things. Big investments, new branches — Mr. Nearing doesn't seem so interested in that side of things, Hilda.”

“Mr. Nearing is a real craftsman. He likes making good knives.”

“Oh, yes, yes; but I hope all that is going to be changed. Money making takes a little daring. With this new plan — ”

“New plan.” Hilda sat up suddenly as though some child of her own had been meddled with by untutored fingers. “What plan? A change at the factory?”

"Well, a little change. But it hasn't gone through yet. Just a new line. Plated ware. We — both — feel that it is time to branch out more widely."

"Plated ware?"

Hilda's brows were gathered in calculation but Mrs. Nearing was not to be diverted from the subject. "Mr. Nearing has always lacked daring, but he thought of this himself. I shall be glad" — Mrs. Nearing sighed quietly, "to have more for Guy. He needs scope, I think."

Hilda was silent. The last little boys, playing late, dashed with their express cart down Nearing Street; a house door opened opposite, showing a girl, in a glow of yellow light, greeting a man. At last Hilda, impulsively, laid her arm across Mrs. Nearing's lap.

"Oh, Hilda! I have always hoped so much for Guy — since he was a baby."

"He knows it, I think."

"There is no reason he should do just what his father does. You don't think so, do you?"

"I think Guy must work it out for himself, Mrs. Nearing."

"I knew you would understand; but Mr. Nearing —"

"Mr. Nearing loves the factory," said Hilda gently. "Where that is concerned it is hard for him to be just."

"That's it. He's not just. Imagine this steady

working up that he thinks is the thing for everybody! That wouldn't do for Guy."

"Guy isn't a plodder."

"Certainly he is not, Hilda. But Guy has great determination, when he likes a thing."

"Yes," said Hilda, putting her honest and experienced thought on the subject, "he has."

"That's why, dear, I want him to find the thing that really appeals to him. Paris was a mistake. I only hope he hasn't suffered too much from it."

"Mrs. Nearing! He isn't ill!"

Hilda sat up, her voice suddenly ringing in the darkness.

"Oh no, dear. No. Not that I know of. But — you're a business woman, Hilda. I suppose I can talk about this to you. Of course Guy hasn't said anything. But he's been through some experience, something sad, something that — he feels — bitter about."

"A woman," said Hilda.

"Well dear, of course young men meet all sorts of people. I don't know anything about it. He hasn't mentioned her."

"Then he's not — thinking of marrying."

"Oh, no. Nothing of that sort. Guy would tell me if it were that." Mrs. Nearing, in motherly security, folded her hands, unmindful of the unlovely vistas she had revealed.

"I hope Guy has not been hurt," said Hilda.

Mrs. Nearing, to-night, was wistfully confiding. Sitting thoughtfully a while, she suddenly ventured. "Hilda — I sometimes thought there might come to be something between Guy and you. You used to write, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Hilda. And then, very slowly, with calm eyes fixed before her, she voiced the matter never approached between her and Guy's mother.

"Guy and I were once," said Hilda, "what school children call in love. It was one of those boy and girl affairs that no one expects to continue. It was all over long ago."

CHAPTER VIII

"HAVE we got everything?"

"The sandwiches can go between my feet."

"Oh, *look* out!"

The canoes were loading at the little landing below the high school. Cato voices were the same this year as they had been years ago, Cato sunshine was as brilliant. The little flies danced, as always in the shadows below the river bank, the birch and aspen leaned over to brush the faces of laughing canoeists.

They were all laughing: canoe parties always went off in a whirl of gaiety. But beneath the jollity, there was many a pair of eyes above a tanned neck and a brilliant sweater, which turned toward the landing to see in which canoe the tallest man in the party was going. Cato parties had had an extra savor, for the last month, because of this man's presence; people wore their best dresses much oftener; sometimes there happened the unheard of phenomenon of a new dress in the middle of the summer. The new man appreciated such things and his way of showing his appreciation was also new and sometimes breath taking. Cato girls found themselves blooming into sophistication.

"It *was* rather a personal thing to say, but of course, men don't mean anything by that."

Girls say that sort of thing a great many years before they believe it.

The new man was going with Elsie Rice, willowy and orchid colored in a new frock she had brought back from Chicago. Little Ethel Byers, just out of high school, had hoped till the last minute and now she was settling into her brother Joe's canoe, silent, with her smooth face a deep pink under the fluffy yellow hair.

"Where's Hil Plaisted?" said somebody. "It's Saturday. I thought she was coming."

"Couldn't get off," said Joe Byers, busily stowing baskets. "I saw her at the Works this noon. But she said she'd walk down for supper and bring the salad."

"Well then, I hope Hil comes!" Fat Eddy Reynolds tumbled into his canoe and took up the paddle, beaming with his idea of a joke. "Are you leading, Guy?"

"Oh, not in the least. Do go on."

Elsie did not hurry with settling her ruffles, and many a canoe, as it forged ahead toward the businesslike goal of sandwiches and salad, carried a girl whose eyes turned wonderingly now and then toward the two who whispered until the party was out of sight.

"Here we are, oh! All out and fifteen minutes for

refreshments. This boat leaves at ten o'clock for Cato Cutlery Works and points east!"

"Ten o'clock! Oh, Eddy, too early!" There was a storm of protest from the girls, scrambling to the leaf-strewn bank, their hands on the shoulders of devoted cavaliers.

"Oh, well, that's just a — what does Guy say?"

"*Façon de dire.*" Ethel Byers spoke up, both frightened and proud and afterward went a permanent pink.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! How does Ethel know French! Will you teach me, Ethel? French lessons must be lots of fun!"

Joe Byers said gruffly: "Three words worth."

"Why, *here's* Guy!"

Toward the open bank, already strewn with lunch baskets and lively with girls in crumpled skirts, the last canoe swept round the bend. It came with unhurried grace, gliding out of the shadows of a side stream: its silhouette was alluring, the woman leaning back, the man forward, dropping a last smiling word, not meant for ears on the bank.

"You didn't waste much time *in* spite — " Eddy Reynolds offered, grinning broadly, lemonade ladle in hand.

"Mr. Nearing didn't forget paddling in Paris." A girl on the bank, where the canoe landed, smiled up at him.

"Nor — people."

"Are you going on with the P's?"

"May I? I used to call you Peggy — once."

"Oh, did you — Guy?"

"He doesn't look older, do you think, people?"

"Younger." Peggy was daring. "But I'm afraid of that sophisticated look in his eyes."

"Pooh! Guy was always sophisticated. Going to mix the drinks, Guy?"

Guy knelt by the basket of ingredients while the girls hovered adventurously near. It was true he hardly looked older. Fascinated and nonplussed, Cato had judged, on first seeing him: "That boy hasn't grown up at all!" That was not strictly true. There were certain shadows about his eyes, he had a sharper chiselling, a cooler poise, but the old boyish gaiety was still there. It had an effect of magic on Cato, where boys went straight from high school to the mill and gaiety lapsed. But Guy was untouched by the drudging responsibility of Joe Byers and Eddy Reynolds. For him, the wander-years of dreaming and adventure were still in full flood and routine only a dull hearsay. His lot had been cast in the more privileged atmosphere of extended youth and glorified possibility.

"I think I have to have more sugar." He was smiling up engagingly at his waiting corps of assistants.

"Oh, take Ethel!" That was Eddy, of course.

Little Ethel Byers, with her teeth set, said chokingly: "It's on the tree stump."

"Ethel," Guy begged her whimsically, "I'm afraid of tree stumps unless they have dryads in them."

"Well, here goes."

Eddy picked the candidate for dryad up bodily and set her, white shoes very small and skirts very high, on the tree stump. Ethel did not step down.

"Take her off! Take her off!"

"Where to?" Guy's eyes were daring.

"Oh, settle it between you. Why not Niagara Falls. Isn't it still the place for —"

There were several people and a pile of sandwiches between Guy and the elm stump. They all remained quite undamaged, but, in another minute, amid breathless shrieks of laughter, Ethel was swept from the stump and disappeared into the sumac thicket in Guy's arms.

"That's too much. Shall we go after them?"

"Oh, be sports!"

"Mr. Nearing's foreign way is so different."

When they returned, a moment later, Ethel with cheeks very pink remained outside the circle. Guy took his place beside Elsie Bauerman.

"They're quite right," she told him demurely. "You are sophisticated. Did you learn to love over there?"

"Or learned there's no such thing." It was then the shadows about his eyes showed, but the remark could hardly be called other than boyish. He was answered by a flash from Elsie's dark eyes, also not

unsophisticated. "Perhaps we both have more discoveries to make."

"Is that a dare?"

"Only conversation. I'm trying to think up a subject for our trip home. You're paddling me? Or aren't you?"

"Guy! Hey! Where's the claret lemonade?"

"*C'est fait.* Gather round, fellow artists."

"Are you a *bonâ fide* artist, Guy?"

"Not on your life. That was just a study year. But it's a lot more fun to have something to work at than just travel around the way some people do."

"Now we're all ready but the salad. Where the dickens is Hil?"

"Oh, she's made it out of nails and steel filings by mistake and she's mixing in some mayonnaise to soften it."

"Hilda? Hilda Plaisted?" Guy looked up from the punch, causing Elsie Bauerman at his elbow to look up also. "Does Hilda eat nails?" Guy jested hastily.

"Oh, my lord, man! Hilda Plaisted half runs the purchasing department. I should think *you'd* know."

"What is a purchasing department?"

Joe Byers did not know whether it was Hilda, or the Works, or the giggles of the company which caused this debonair detachment. He compressed the explanation he had been generously ready to

make, Hilda's position at the Works being better than his.

"Why — you buy — the steel. And bones. To make cutlery."

"*Ma foi!*" The new man's attention was quite genuinely caught.

"I wonder," Elsie Bauerman meditated, drawing an orchid-colored fold through her fingers, "whether one could like to buy steel — and clothes too. What would a Parisian say?"

"I bet that's Hil."

But it was the youngest boy, with no special lady, who went to meet her.

"Not late, is it? You people forgot the paper napkins. I knew you would, so I stopped at Mrs. Byers' to get them."

Hilda stepped out of the bush-bordered path that led to the high-road half a mile away. She was rather a burdened Hilda, with a basket in one hand and a package in the other, slow at letting them go, too, because the youngest boy was uninitiated into the sacredness of salad.

"Why, little Ethel Byers," said Hilda. "You look tired!"

"Ho ho!"

"Come and fix the sandwiches, Hil. You're the only one that knows which ones were packed where."

"And Hil, is this the table cloth? And where on earth are the salt and pepper?"

"I'll fix this, shall I? And nobody's been to the spring for water yet."

Hilda, kneeling on the ground, was already at work. She gave, in her white dress, an impression of serene effectiveness. It was an almost maternal effectiveness, bringing no rival to the other girls. They turned to, domestically, to help her.

"Hil, here's an old love of yours."

It must be admitted that, for the moments after Hilda was announced, Guy had been busy with Elsie Bauerman. But now he had scrambled forward.

"Hil! Want to see little boy next door? Why, you grown-up, magnificent Hilda Plaisted!"

She had a plate in each hand. Her face was flushed under the thick, parted brown hair.

"I got your post card from Paris," said Hilda.

"You didn't answer it. You didn't tell me you hoped I'd come home."

Elsie was patently waiting: Ethel Byers patently listening. A certain strain in their attitude relaxed at Hilda's answer, whole-hearted, almost maternal. "I hope you're having a good rest here now you've come, Guy."

He lingered a minute. "But I never see you."

"Hilda works for a living. What do you think, man?"

That saved Hilda's answer, so what she said was: "We're ready, people, if Henry has the water."

By common consent, it was Hilda who made the table arrangements. While boys maneuvered carefully among tree stumps and rocks to find comfortable backs for their girls and adjacent places for themselves, her post was conceded to be behind the sandwich box, where she could produce salt and pickles and olives.

Joe Byers, somewhat placated by a seat on one side of Elsie, started conversation: "Say, Hil, heard any more about Witmer's going?"

"They've increased the offer. I believe he's thinking of it."

Joe Byers was an inveterate talker of shop. "Hilda's boss may be going," he explained with a sidelong look at Elsie's back. "Light out and leave her to find a new one."

"Take me, Hil!"

"At Witmer's salary? No, me!"

"With Witmer's privileges? Why not me?"

"Do you know what Witmer's privileges are, Guy?" Hilda smiled without rancor at the last questioner.

"He buys steel. And bones. To make cutlery. And talks to you about it every morning. I bet I could improve on Witmer's talks with his assistant."

"By having fewer witnesses present. Ha ha!"

"Are you thinking of coming into the Works, Guy?"

She wanted to know: her blue eyes were thought-

ful. And the others, realizing that high finance was being discussed, and the heir of the Works revealing his intentions, lent an ear.

"Do you invite me?"

"Not to the purchasing department."

Guy hugged his knees, laughing at her. "Ah, but I'd make quite a chic boss. Don't you honestly think so — Hildare?"

At that word the impersonal Hilda flushed as deeply as Ethel Byers. That she made no retort whatever passed unnoticed, because Hilda was not given to retorts. Elsie Bauerman hid her by leaning forward.

"It's ladies you want to boss, not work."

"It's ladies I want to see exist, not work."

Cato was silent in the face of this philosophy and even its sponsor went no further. Perhaps the new found point of view was a little painful to sustain. At any rate, his conversation changed to low words with Elsie.

"Guy! Tell us about that student riot in Paris!"

"One was drunk."

"You mean two hundred were. Gee, it must have been a lark!"

The girls, rather fearsomely, accepted this point of view, not generic in Cato. The narrative soared on to realms of debonair vandalism. Guy ended: "It was quaint, you know."

"Oh," breathed Cato. "Yes."

"It must be stunning to be an artist, Guy!"

Guy, leaning back with his hands behind his head, surveyed the flickering fire and the dark tree trunks contentedly. "One amused oneself," he confessed. "So why not!"

The stars were reflected in the still reach of water beyond the bank, the low evening breeze was rustling the birch leaves.

"Late moon tonight," said the practical Joe Byers. "Be good and dark getting around the bend."

"Let's shake again for partners going home," proposed some enterprising aspirant. "Got an extra girl now, anyway."

"Oh," said Hilda, "I want to walk the way I came. The salad bowl came from Mrs. Marks on the state road and she wants it tomorrow for the church luncheon."

"Well, Hil, you can't go alone!"

Hilda was picking up the supper dishes: she turned obligingly to say: "Well, then, whoever lives nearest, come with me."

It was dark, especially there under the trees, and no one could see whether Hilda's face went terrified after that innocent slip or not. Every one in Cato knew where every one else lived and the Nearings and the Plaisteds had been next door to one another for twenty years. Guy, concealed in the shadow beside Elsie Bauerman, leaned forward gallantly:

"You invite me to something, if not the purchasing department?"

"Oh — I — "

"It was raw, Hil, but you've got him."

From the darkness where Hilda sat there came no answer at all. Elsie was heard to laugh low and alluring: "Oh, you must."

There was a scrambling and a heaving up of baskets. A girl whispered to another in the dark: "That may have been, but, my dear, he hasn't been with her at *all*." Guy held Elsie's sweater: "*A demain*. Yes?" Then the chatting party began to shove off from the bank.

"Where is the famous salad bowl?"

Guy, smiling, was facing Hilda among the remains. She thrust it toward him violently as if he had suspected her of inventing it. "But I can carry it."

"Oh, ladies never carry salad bowls. Only steel rails — and kegs of nails — and — and — "

"Puppy dogs' tails."

It was a reminder of an old children's chant. Hilda was nervous, it had slipped out unaware because she was so deadly anxious not to say anything personal. But the old words could not help but carry them back a little. He laughed and took her elbow gently: "It's dark among these bushes."

Guy guiding Hilda among the wood paths of Cato, which she knew like her own hand!

"I'll go ahead," he said "and hold the bushes back."

Conversation was avoided that way, too. For a while they tramped silently, in pitch blackness where they could hear each other breath, where her hand sometimes touched his as she passed him, holding a springy branch for her. She sprang back hastily when that happened and he proceeded in a business-like way, his feet cracking the dead sticks of the path.

"We ought to be just about at the road, now."

"Oh, ought we?" Immense impersonality in his tone, too.

"Don't you think you turn to the right somewhere here?"

"Well, turn to the right."

He turned and she was thankful that he walked in silence. She thought of nothing but to follow as ably as she could so that she might never need a supporting hand. He cast a polite remark now and then but after a while it was she who broke the silence: "Guy — you're on a path, aren't you?"

"More or less. These bushes grow every which way."

"Do you mind — let me look!"

She edged past him, he gave her a hand and she accepted it so as not to stumble into his arms. She could see that they were in a little open track, but laurel bushes often leave such. Hilda, with her

brain thronging with other memories, tried desperately to recollect just how the open track on which they ought to be should look.

"Way clear, captain?"

"I — don't see anything I recognize."

"Oh, well, let's go on anyway."

He was bored and cross: pushing one's way through springy bushes is pleasant only under certain circumstances. Hilda followed mute, but her brain began gradually to clear and turn itself to the present situation.

"Guy!"

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid we're only getting further off the track this way."

"Oh, Lord! Where may the track be about to be?"

"I'll try to think."

He left the whole matter in her hands, as though Cato and its woods were no concern of his.

"I am sorry," Hilda said, very humbly. "I really have lost my bearings. You can tell where the track joins the road by the big blasted oak tree."

"Oh, yes. Big blasted oak tree. Do you think it could be that over there? Or that?"

Hilda strained her eyes, passionately anxious to make out the stark, leaning form. In that light there were a dozen streaks against the sky which might be blasted oak trees. He lit a match, but it

was not helpful. It only showed them leaves and sticks on the ground and no evidence of a path.

"Kismet," said Guy. "I understand there is a moon later in the night. I don't quite see what one does except to wait about and let it light us. Moons are supposed to do that. Do you agree?"

"It'll come about midnight."

"Well, that's a decent hour. I think you can sit on this log. May I smoke?"

He lit a match. Hilda saw nothing but his hands, long and straight: almost the last time she had seen them they had held hers. After a while her perverse practicality forced from her:

"You don't have to stand up. There is room on the log."

"How good of you."

In the dark she felt him sink beside her. Hilda had never been alone in dark woods with a man nor, perhaps, had Guy with a woman. She did not know the memories which flooded upon him now were not those of a canoe rocking near the bank while the distant bell tolled for prayer meeting. She did not know that the person he visioned beside him was not the girl he had kissed because she lived next door, but the woman he thought of as his first love. Yet neither was over twenty-five.

"You've become — a business woman, I think."

"Not very much of one."

"Not much of one — really?"

He seemed to find it easier, in the dark, to speak even to Hilda as he would to another woman. She broke in brusquely: "You enjoyed it in Paris?"

To her clear tones he was not ready with an answer. He moved restlessly and as he did so, his hand touched Hilda's. He held it.

"Oh!"

"I suppose you don't remember." It was the very devil of habit that made Guy take that easy path. She answered him:

"I remember."

"It's quite a long time."

She suddenly choked, the lump in her throat too painful for words. She waited for Guy to explain and Guy, holding her hand, felt nothing: confused, painful memories, confused, warm sensations. At this time he should have been with Elsie Bauerman, talking as he had vowed to talk with every woman henceforth. They said it was easy and Guy, too short a time ago, had vowed all his youthful pride to the defense of taking love as a game.

"Did you find it a long time, Hildare?"

Still she could not answer.

His arm went round her, such an easy place to go. "You've thought of me sometimes, Hildare? Have you been so good?"

He did not see her smile in the dark. There was no answer.

"Hil — Hil!"

His arm was very close: no one could pretend that an embrace like that came from any one but a lover. And Hilda succumbed to it. If she had meant not to, then was the minute to tear herself away. She did not: she left her head fall to his shoulder.

"You're going to kiss me, Hil, aren't you?"

She had no time to be surprised at the request from one whose right it was. She soon saw what it meant. He asked no permission to kiss her: he wanted a return. And after a while, breathless but whole hearted, Hilda gave it.

"Oh, Hil, you love me! You must love me!"

She had hardly spoken all this time: she did not speak now for a few minutes. But at last, in the intense silence of the woods, leaning close against him, Hilda said:

"Yes, Guy. I have always loved you. I have never loved any one else. I never will. I belong to you."

He seized her like a whirlwind. Those were not the kisses which Hilda remembered, nor of which she had dreamed. She suffered from them in helpless silence and then she waited for Guy to go on, to go back, to their old bond of years ago, to the life promises and the life plans.

Hilda had kissed Guy, one firm steady pressure of the lips. But his were constant, hungry. Hilda had never been kissed on her eyes, her ears, her

throat; she had never been kissed by any one but Guy, years ago. He could not see in the darkness how her face changed. She could not see how there was in his eyes the memory, not for her, but of someone else, challenging and stinging. She yielded to him, because she had just told him that she loved him: what else should she do? And he clasped her because Chiquette had told him one found happiness that way. It was Fate's unkindness that the supple body on the log beside him happened to belong to Hilda.

"Oh — a minute, Guy."

"How thick your hair is! Will it come down if I run my fingers through it like this?"

"Please — please not."

"The moon won't see."

"I believe it's coming. We ought to go."

"I'm going to think of you always when I see moonlight. Or woods. Do you know, I may be going to South America soon? May I think of you when I see moonlight on the pampas? And will you remember that I'm doing it?"

" — Remember?"

"Yes. No matter whom you're seeing it with." His lips brushed her hair. "Sweet Hilda! I'm glad you came with me tonight."

"You're going — to South America, Guy!"

"Perhaps. Why not?"

"For — long?"

"Oh, the Lord knows, my beautiful gracious lady. But I don't believe the moonlight there is any nicer than here. Moonlight is yours."

In the rising light it was just possible to see Hilda's face. It struck Guy that moonlight produced a rather terrible pallor. Of all the words she might have said, it never occurred to Hilda to say one, Hilda who had opened her heart completely and been told that the moonlight was hers. She rose from the log unsteadily: she seemed, not tragic, but dazed and absent minded.

"I can see my way home," she said. "Don't come."

"But — why, how absurd!"

She pushed past him, not omitting to take the salad bowl from his hand.

"Why, Hilda, did I offend you?"

How can one tell a man he has offended one when he has offered an evening's flirtation instead of a lifelong love! Hilda's voice was almost breaking.

"Don't come. I said — don't come."

"I heard you, but you're quite mad. Was it wrong to kiss you? I thought you liked it."

It was humiliation too painful for words that saved Hilda from making an answer to that. She was already some distance away and he was helplessly following her.

"There!" she pointed. "That's the blasted tree. You can get to it any way through the bushes."

"You must really let me go with you to the road."

She gave up the unequal struggle and only turned without a word. He followed, at her headlong speed. But to find words which would call attention from the vigorous back was difficult.

At the road she stopped, her voice quite expressionless. "I'm going to stop at Mrs. Marks' and then home. The road's quite plain."

"I hope you understand, Hilda — "

Then, with her voice breaking with sobs, feeling nothing but the agonized necessity to be away from him without any more effort, Hilda babbled:

"Oh, yes. It's quite all right. I understand. Of course. You don't mind letting me go on."

CHAPTER IX

"SORT of cloudy, Mother. I think I'll take my umbrella."

"Yes, do, dear."

It was Mr. and Mrs. Nearing, saying their morning good-by in the hall. Their words floated up to Guy, awakening from that dreary half-hour of dreams that succeeds a sleepless night. Perhaps he should have felt ready this morning to apologize to Hilda and to curse himself. His mental state was unbearable enough for that, but some hitch of pride forbade. Guy, so far, was not used to cursing himself. Instead, as he opened his eyes, there came upon him a gust of loathing for Cato, where plodding men kissed their wives good-by every morning with the very same words; where there was no outlet for unhappiness but in some mistake unendurable to remember.

The lawns outside were already astir; wagons rumbled down Nearing Street; at the house beyond the syringa hedge someone was hanging out washing. There had been times in the last years when Guy had thought of these things with a lonely affection. Some vague plan had shimmered in his mind, of

returning to the Works to see them revived by a new knowledge of beauty and usefulness. That plan, without his knowledge, had been extinguished during the night. The Cato Cutlery Works at present stood in the same town with a girl whom he could not face. And because of Hilda and her quiet inescapability, the Works had become anathema, with the town which contained them. Guy reached violently for the letter which had come from South America. It meant a change, at least, and for the present he could not see beyond that. The thing he wanted was action. Why not in Argentina as well as another place?

As he caught the letter toward him with a destructive arm, there was a timid knock at the door. It was Mrs. Nearing, rather apologetic, for she had learned that even if a son stays in bed until eleven, he may not be ill.

"Just to know if you're going to be home to lunch, dear —"

"Father going to be here?"

"Why, of course." (Would James Nearing be in his chocolate-colored mansion when the factory closed for the noon hour! Guy sometimes shrugged over foolishness in his mother: she felt a patient superiority to him just then.)

"Want to see him, I guess."

There was some new note in the tone that set Mrs. Nearing's heart to quickening painfully. Ah,

she had heard it before. It was the note that thrilled of distance: it meant that her boy was not content with the things she could give him, and that she knew were not enough. Mrs. Nearing must have been getting older, for it used to thrill her too with the glory and the possibility; now it made her cry.

"Guy dear, your father is thinking of taking up some new lines in the factory, something that will mean a good deal more money — and scope."

She was wistful. He did not recognize the plea that the words carried.

"Why that's good, Moth."

His tone was absent, but when he saw her face he reached out a hand to pull her to the bedside.

"Let's hear what you're going to do, you two schemers. It is a plan of yours, Lady?"

"Not mine, of course."

She had sat down beside him, almost timidly, the strain smoothing instantly from her face. "You know I don't dictate in your father's affairs."

"Pretty hands, Moth."

"Oh Guy!" She smiled quickly.

One of the hands had gone caressingly to his hair. There was a keen, secret satisfaction in admiring Guy's hair. After all, it *was* like hers.

"But I understand this will be quite a large undertaking."

"Will, eh? More power to your elbows. They

do use elbow grease in making cutlery? Lots of it, I expect."

Guy's attitude was that of a clever older person encouraging children. Mrs. Nearing, a slender hand on his, felt warmed and pacified.

"Think they're going to make money, Moth? Florins, ducats, things to buy ladies black velvet dresses and limousines? I say, you'd look wonderful in pearls —"

Guy's conversation was so fantastic.

"Pearls in Cato, my child!"

"Why not? Or go away from Cato."

At that Mrs. Nearing's handsome face assumed again its strained, wistful look. It was a look that sat well on well cut features; Guy had become accustomed to it. It only struck him now how handsome his mother looked when the glow of pleasure and pride replaced the wistfulness.

"Like to go away from Cato, beautiful lady? Such a rash idea. Whatever would the chief of the factory say?"

"My place is with your father, dear. I — I do not expect to get away from here — now."

And how noble she looked — and quiet! Her hand stroked his hair gently, her voice was a little tremulous. "It's you who must do the going away for all of us. That is what I have always hoped, my child. Your father and I will do the plodding part; the brilliant one is to be left for you."

"Who am brilliant? Nice to finish the compliment that way, dearest."

She even flushed a little. "You know what I think, dear."

"Well, then" — he reached for the letter — "I've thought of a fine place to go. What do you say, *duchesse*? South America. A ranch, great fortune, life of a wild free gentleman, president of a republic next revolution!"

"A ranch, Guy?" She was not disappointed, only a little puzzled and waiting.

"Got a letter from Rawson." His own look was not exactly exuberant. "I told you about the art. It was understood in the beginning I wasn't necessarily an artist."

"There's plenty of time."

He laughed, stretching restlessly. "Let us hope. Heaven knows what I wouldn't have to turn my hand to if there wasn't time. Why are all jobs so dull, Moth?"

"You have a great deal of ability."

It was her unconscious answer to an unacknowledged challenge.

Guy threw both arms above his head. "Art's good for training, of course. Broadens your outlook, and it was lots of fun. But, I'll tell you here in our privacy, with no hardware officials listening, that the best part of it was knowing the fellows, getting up a club we had, and all that."

"The Van Wycks were always socially sought after."

He smiled somewhat wryly as he stroked her hand. "Well, considering that painting is no real forte of mine, mightn't I as well find some occupation a little nearer earth?"

"The factory, Guy?"

"Oh thunder, beloved. I mean real earth. Primitive earth. Rawson writes about a ranch he's bought."

"Don't you feel well yet, dear? Do you think you need the country?"

There was a real note of tenderness in his voice. "I'm all right. And I've been out of college a year or so now. I suppose I really ought to think up something."

There was such conscientiousness in his tone that she was smitten with remorse. "Not unless you've found the thing you like to do, Guy. Your father is quite able to let you get your education and look around."

"Nice Lady Mother. And I suppose it's really nothing against a ranch if I think it sounds rather fun?"

He smiled at that, and the smile was so persuasive and delightful that all other considerations floated away into the irrelevant. He elucidated to her eager silence:

"It's a business in that it wants — shall we say —

capital. But dad's got plenty. Might as well let it have a party in South America if he can't give it one here. I don't believe capital likes Cato. Always heard it was jolly sagacious. Must be bored to tears."

Mrs. Nearing was thinking of something, but it was not one of the things she ever told her son. She finished the problem with a shake of her head. "I will explain to your father."

"So awfully convenient of you, darling, because then I shan't lose my temper. You like the ranch idea yourself — yes?"

She smiled down at him gently. "Of course there is time for you to do that. You're very young still —"

He ran an irritated hand through the hair she had been smoothing. "Oh, as for that—! But father has the money and I haven't the factory *flair* — just now. So it seems simple. Don't it seem simple, *Mère Merveilleuse?*"

"My dear boy, I want you to be happy. That comes first."

He pulled her to him with an amount of roughness that added spice to the caress. "Oh well, listen, darling. I expect to be just as big a magnate as you want me to. Only, Lord knows, there's heaps of time. Maybe when I get through with ranching I'll be ready to come back and go into partnership with dad. Or why don't you get him to build a

branch works and let me fool with it? That would be something like!"

"Your father thinks you need training first, Guy."

"Piffle! What'll happen when I have 'em anyway?"

It was hardly a tactful allusion, but Mrs. Nearing, her son's arm about her, let it pass without a shock.

"We hope to leave them to you in good shape at least, dear."

"'Wel' You talk like a devil of a financier. Go to it, mother dearest!"

"I must go to look after lunch."

She was dignified but flushed. Guy's caresses were not inexpert. At the door she paused:

"You can have your breakfast in bed. I thought when I came in you looked as if you hadn't slept much last night."

"Oh! No." Mrs. Nearing was alarmed at the black change in his face.

"Don't get up at all if you don't feel well."

"I'm all right. G'by, Mother."

She closed the door, shut out. Guy's gracefulness ceased when something worried him. A little later she heard the front door slam. Guy's rapid, angry steps were trying to escape the facts, down Nearing Street.

"Why, there's Hilda," said Mrs. Nearing at the kitchen window. "I wonder if she'll ask him there to lunch."

Mrs. Nearing moved to the pantry: she did not see that minute's encounter. It would have frightened her, would have frightened anyone, whether a stranger to love and scorn and heart-rending disillusion or no. After it Hilda walked up the Plaisteds' path counting the steps and using a murderous effort of will to accomplish each one. She opened the door, ready to scream with terror lest a small brother or sister or a good-humored parent should be behind it. There was no one. Hilda could not climb the stairs. She turned into the parlor, vacant and orderly at lunch time. She sank on the sofa, brown, with red roses and satin cushions, whose cords were looped at the corners. Hilda was never afraid of death after that, nor even curious as to its awful onswEEP. Hilda had seen it, annihilating and terrible, as a wave come to drown a helpless castaway panting at a cliff's foot. She had seen the man she had loved all her life, and who yesterday had killed that love just to pass the time, come sauntering toward her and lift his hat.

She did not know what her face was like, and by one of those chances that oppose felicity in little things to tragedy in the great ones, none of her family saw it. Guy had been the only observer. He came full on her as he passed through his gate and Hilda approached hers. Guy was deeply at odds with life, struggling not to think about the thing that had gone so wrong with him. Then he saw

the face of Hilda whom he had kissed. Never, before or after that, had Guy such a fire-clear picture of himself as he looked to someone who despised him. Even Hilda, in words, could never have told him what her face said then.

Hilda did not speak. Hilda, after that one glance which he had met, without her will, turned her head away. She walked up the Plaisteds' path and Guy saw their door close behind her.

The feeling of shock had been hardly supportable: it gave way to one of rage. Guy did not know what made him feel weak and more unhappy than he had ever been in his life; he did not want to know. He beat off the possibility of knowing. Instead he hated the woman who had looked at him like that: he hated the sidewalk where she had stood and the house into which she had turned, the street which held the house and the town which held the street. His thoughts were a burning rage.

All that Mrs. Nearing saw was that her son, after passing the girl next door, went on down the street.

"All right, Helga," she said, "we'll be three for lunch."

But the lunch hour arrived; Mr. Nearing plodded up the steps and, because he must soon plod down them again, they sat down to eat. Guy had not come.

"James — Guy spoke to me about a plan — "

"He did?" Mr. Nearing looked up very sharply.

fork suspended over a codfish-ball. But the gleam died instantly out of his mild, blue eyes: he must have recognized that it was the sort of plan of which he had heard before. "We'll have a big job, Laura, with my scheme for the plated ware," he countered, timidly aware what his strength amounted to when pitted against his son's.

Mrs. Nearing only said: "Guy's scheme is something about — South America."

"Well — he wants to leave Cato, I suppose. Hasn't had enough gadding yet?"

"James, he's very young."

"Is it anything that's going to give him a start at work?"

"Guy has so many possibilities, James."

Mr. Nearing went on with the codfish ball: his appetite was unassailable.

"Laura, it's a big move, this plated ware. I'm investing a lot in it."

"I'm sure you are going to do wonderfully, dear."

It was not as though she had not said it before, nor expressed with the zest for a new thing. But even yet Mrs. Nearing's eyes lit with an eagerness to push a man forward.

"That will be so nice for Guy, dear."

"Oh, yes."

He pushed the finished plate away and rose. Mr. Nearing's air was not actually weary: it had a slowness as of year-long resignation. He went to

the window to look at the weather before going out, a habit conserved from farm days, inveterate.

"Here's Guy, dear. Helga, I want you to make some fresh codfish cakes."

"Don't want any. Can you wait a minute, father?"

They were both surprised at Guy's face. It sometimes expressed determination quite as positive as his father's, but of a different kind. Guy having made a decision was not always an easy person to deal with. At this moment he looked strained, even wild. Mrs. Nearing put her hand to her heart and, but for the grim concentration of his eyes, would have asked if he were ill. Tremulously she proffered: "I've been telling your father, dear —"

"I think I'll get off next week, Mother."

"Out of the country?" It was Mr. Nearing, slow and expressionless.

"Out of the country." Guy was expressionless too. If he had been like his mother this morning he was like his father now. He had not even approached the family table. In the door, hands in pockets, a fierce light in his eyes, he stood eyeing the two who spoke for Cato.

"What will you go on?"

Mr. Nearing was standing too, and his eyes were hard, not with rage but with timid desperation.

"On my nerve. Have you any objection?"

"Oh Guy, Guy, you mustn't!"

Mrs. Nearing spoke rapidly, and her husband's stolid eyes were raised to her, unwinking.

"James, dear, I want you to let me explain it. One of Guy's friends is making this investment in a — farm for raising cattle, isn't it, dear? And he wants Guy to go in with him. Not permanently, perhaps. Just for an interesting experiment for a year or two. I really think it will do the boy good — that outdoor life."

"Is there money in it?"

"What the hell do I know?"

"We've talked it all over, James. Guy has explained to me very carefully. I really think it would be a good thing. I should be glad to have him do it."

It was her verdict, offered more hastily, perhaps, because of her husband's opposition. Mr. Nearing heard it and said nothing at all.

"I wish you'd tell him all about it, Guy."

Guy in the door, impatience glinting in his eyes, spoke carelessly. "I suppose you feel I ought to go to work. Though that isn't an opinion shared by other people's fathers who are willing to give beauty and culture a little chance to live, too. Very well. Here's a proposition. Ranches are work enough, I understand. A friend of mine's bought one in South America. He wants me as a partner."

"Have you ever managed a ranch?"

"I have not." There had been other retorts on

the tip of Guy's tongue, but retorts lost their savor with James Nearing. One felt he could not understand them. He stood now, looking at the floor in in silence. He was not a passionate man, and when he spoke the sharpness of his first tones was gone. Doggedly he stated: "There's the Works."

"My God!"

The obstinate, middle-aged man and the vivid and angry young one crossed glances, too sharply stirred for words. There was no help or encouragement for Guy in the quiet maker of knives, whose puzzled eyes regarded him with helpless disapproval. All the son's reserves of wilfulness and impatience and scorn rose to the surface. "Thanks, Father. I haven't a taste for cutlery."

Mr. Nearing heard it as a condemned man after repeated trials and appeals might hear his sentence. The finality of his silence may have struck Guy too. "Good heavens!" he appealed in a despairing protest, "it isn't necessary to save one's soul, is it?"

"Of course not, Guy. We will never force you to spend your life doing something you don't like."

"Guy's eyes sought his mother's ruefully. He was more than ready for the interview to end; there was load enough pressing upon him already. But he could not leave her with that beaten look. "Cheer up, Moth! I say, I shan't be ranching forever. Isn't there all the time in the world?"

"I want you to be happy, dear."

And more than that. By the light in her dark eyes as they were turned up at Guy, right under James Nearing's stolid gaze, it was obvious that all the treasure of her hopes was still stored with him. It was for James Nearing to fulfil those hopes.

"Well, then, friends and parents," Guy forced back the old debonair manner, "isn't the good, kind cutlery business going to shed a little hardware in the form of dollars?"

"Yes, dear. Your father will let you have what is needed."

"Thanks awfully, dad. You won't catch any poison from owning a ranch in South America." His whimsical tone came back as he watched James Nearing reach for his hat. "You may even get to like it."

"I'll let you have what I can, Guy. Your mother wants I should."

With a mechanical glance at the clock he moved toward the door. Half-way to it he remembered and came back for his good-by kiss to Mrs. Nearing. She sat rather quietly after the touch of his lips and then ventured to Guy:

"You don't think you could put off the ranch for a while?"

Guy's hand fell to her shoulder. They were caught in a moment of reaction and, for various reasons, they were both miserable. He said, with passionate feeling:

"I want to be out of here!"

"I know you don't like Cato," she returned.
"Can I help you pack?"

"All right, darling, but don't give me any of father's props except handkerchiefs. Your hair looks pretty in the back. Just for that you can go up ahead of me."

It was very much less than a week later that Guy was ready. His trunk had been packed without glances out of the window that looked toward the syringa hedge. Unaccountably such glances sickened him, and then it was not only Cato that looked gray—it was the world. He pulled to the blind on that window on the last morning with a throb of exultation, because for not one minute since his meeting with Hilda had that house been out of his mind.

"It'll be out now," Guy said as he closed the blind. "It'll be *out*!" He had not admitted he was thinking about that house: he was thinking about alfalfa and the price of cattle. But nevertheless he had come to a conclusion, which was this: "If it was bad, it was so bad that no apology I could make would be enough." He had writhed at this point, at the unwilling thought of the words that might be necessary. "And if it wasn't bad, it doesn't need to be spoken of at all and she's a fool for thinking it does."

For he knew very well that Hilda thought it needed to be spoken about; but to eat humble pie was a thing not within the range of Guy Nearing's possibilities. Nor was it within them ever to meet Hilda Plaisted on the street again. It was that, perhaps, which precipitated the decision for South America, without thought or plan.

All Cato woke up, fascinated at the thought of that departure. Guy was wearily conscious of the awe in the greetings of the other men, and of the dazzled resignation of Elsie Bauerman and Ethel Byers. It was one thing to take a playtime in Europe as *thé* epilogue to college: of that they had heard before, though only as the privilege of princes. But to come home, still unfettered, and to float away, still free from the shadow of responsibility — these things, though no one realized it at the time, set Guy permanently apart from his old following. They had used to suppose their leader capable of anything. Now they still believed him to shine in realms they did not know of — but not in the realms they knew.

"Think of all the people he's known! And the way he can start things!"

"I should think Guy could do 'most anything he wanted."

So the young people of Cato. But they had to admit the reservation — there seemed nothing Guy wanted. Puzzled, they conceded at last: "Maybe

it's hard to decide when you've got the whole world to choose from. . . . It's a good thing, likely, that everybody isn't rich."

The judgment of the older ones was simpler: "Looks like the elder's son ain't much of a sticker."

It had been a turning point for Guy, and even he, in the lapses of his irritation, realized the fact. He had half thought, on the way home from Europe, of settling down, of finding something which, to his own satisfaction and the approval of everyone, should begin the foundations of the future. But all that had been swept away and there was no one but the pitiable and irritating James Nearing to remind him of it. It is possible for the passage of the years to be so veiled that opportunity seems intact. This had happened to Guy.

"It won't be for always," he had told his mother. And this was all he had let himself think. Nor did anyone force him further.

He took leave of his father before the latter went to his office in the morning.

"Good-by, Guy. Take care of yourself."

Mr. Nearing was without rancor: the ceremony had hardly delayed him a minute by the clock. He added, before he went down the steps: "Your mother wants you to get along well."

In the hall, after the expressman had taken the trunk away, Mrs. Nearing clung to her tall son. "I know about the trouble of writing, dear, but —"

"Oh rather, Moth! I never left you without letters. You know I didn't."

"I know."

Cato had dulled a dramatic expressiveness in Mrs. Nearing that might have been powerful. There, in the darkened hall, it showed just for a minute.

"My one son! I'll be lonely. But you know how much I want for you. Go where you like. You'll make me proud one day, won't you?"

"Moth, darling!" There were tears in his eyes. "I don't want to leave you, Moth. You'll come down to South America. No? Come awfully soon."

"But you'll come back to Cato, Guy."

He laughed reassuringly as he patted the fingers on his coat-sleeve. "I'll do the town that honor!" But in his heart Guy was saying:

"Never! Never! Never!"

CHAPTER X

"WILL you assure me that the whole shipment of bones will be up to this sample?"

It was Hilda, at the desk of the purchasing agent, behind the glass door on the second floor of the Cato Cutlery Works. She was more assured than in other days, and better dressed. A certain trustfulness, almost childlike, which had lingered about her, was gone. But Hilda was not crushed: only tranquil and with her whole mind free to give to the business of the Cutlery Works, of which bones happened to be a part.

The salesman to whom she spoke was almost hurt. "Why! Ask me a thing like that, Miss Plaisted! Of course you're still new to this business, but I can tell you that Mr. Witmer would have understood that when my people make an offer, the guarantee is taken for granted."

"I have the responsibility now — at least until a permanent purchasing agent is appointed. Your price suits me: I will accept it, but only if it is written into the order that the shipment is to be up to sample."

"Have to gratify ladies, even if they seem a little

fussy." The agent beamed brightly enough to cover up his innuendo.

Outside, he crooked his thumb toward the glass door he had just left. "Is the lady permanent in there?" he asked of Smythe, the head clerk.

"We hope so."

Smythe was a little sandy-moustached man, well known in the Cato Sunday School. He was a man who had found his perfect niche in the world, since he liked details and hated to boss people. The Cato Cutlery Works satisfied these preferences at twenty-five dollars a week.

The salesman pulled straight the comical face he had been about to make. "Where's Witmer?"

"Bridgeport."

"And the man below him?"

"Boss took him along. That left Miss Plaisted next. She'd been half running the department for a year, anyway."

"Well, I hope she holds out." The salesman was slightly sinister. "They's a lot of firms ain't so considerate of a lady as mine is."

Smythe turned conscientiously to the price list he was checking. Presently he picked up a pile of papers and went to the glass door.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Smythe. These look like good bones, don't they?"

Hilda and Joe Duane of the assembly room had their heads together. "They're all right, Miss

Plaisted," Joe adjudged. "I wish you'd let me have 'em right now. We're short for handles this minute."

"You'll have to get along with the old stock, Joe. I must keep this sample for reference."

Hilda was making a label for the bag which she slung into a cupboard. Smythe and Joe caught each other's eyes, loyally expressionless. Witmer would not have done that.

"I must say," commented Joe, "you're as good a judge of bones as I am. But I think you're being extra careful."

"Feminine fussiness, Joe."

Her smile was disarming. Besides, the men at the Works were like Hilda's family: they would as soon think of resenting her actions as those of a little sister who had been with them through thick and thin. Smythe placed the in-basket on her desk and lingered for a moment's chat.

"Quotations on phosphor bronze are higher. Looks like your first deal there was going to be a good one."

"Oh, honestly, Mr. Smythe?" Hilda looked girlish then and the Cato Sunday School superintendent was as pleased as she.

"I'm going to tell the boss. It's a good thing for him to know."

"That's the ticket. Tell him."

They looked up and saw in the door, Mr. Nearing.

With any other man Hilda and Smythe would have been confused and babbled re-statements. But Mr. Nearing was incapable of sarcasm. He stood beaming down on Hilda with old eyes that contained something a little baffled and far-away.

"I'm glad to see you here, Hildare. It's a great day. I'm proud."

Smythe, beaming also, departed and closed the door respectfully.

"Ten years, Hildare?"

"It wasn't long."

"No — it wa'n't long. And you worked. Ten years!"

"Is Mrs. Nearing better?"

"Not to speak of, Hil. Ailing, it seems like." He sat still for a while in the arm chair opposite Hilda's desk, and she became aware of something weighty in the silence. As she looked anxiously toward him, her eyes met his: — two pairs of gray eyes, one clear and purposeful, and one, mild, wistful, and resigned.

"You've always been like a — child of my own, Hil. I wanted you should know first. About my going."

"Your — going!"

He seemed distressed by her passionate young protest, but it was not in James Nearing to evade an issue. He waited just a moment, turning the sea bean watch charm which Hilda remembered from

infancy and then stated the matter: "Anson's bought me out."

"What! How dare he!"

"It a'n't that, Hil. There a'n't anything you should mind about."

"Oh, tell me!"

Those used to Hilda's controlled office manner should have seen her at that moment with tears in her eyes as she laid her hand on Mr. Nearing's knee.

"Well, Hil, you remember the plated ware?" He watched her nod. "That was it."

"But that's over. We got out of the hole remarkably well!" Hilda's "we" in relation to all dealings at the Works was unconscious now. She had been perfectly acquainted with every step in the disastrous venture of the plated ware. She knew of the high-priced man brought from another city, who, after all, did not know his job. She knew of the modern patterns, somewhat blindly chosen and unpopular from the first, she knew of the acid bath with the wrong proportions, the crack-ing enamel.

"It was my mistake. So I paid for it."

Contemplatively she regarded him in the quiet of the little office where they were almost equals. She asked:

"Why did you do it, Mr. Nearing?"

He looked away from her, sighing. "Seems like

I'm not much of a person for big ventures, Hil. But you see, we weren't doing anything so very great. And I was getting old —"

He stuck there, and Hilda gasped. "Oh, Mr. Nearing, you didn't think you had to!"

He was silent, looking wistfully beyond her. "*She* always set store by my doing something big."

"You've done magnificently. You couldn't have worked harder!"

He seemed a little weary at that. "I don't suppose I've made much of a life for Mrs. Nearing. And for Guy."

"Guy," said Hilda, "doesn't understand."

He nodded. In all her life Hilda had never heard Mr. Nearing speak a disparaging word about his son. "I guess he don't, Hilda. I a'n't never told Guy about the business. Guy," he continued, with a certain detached meekness, "is like his mother."

"But Mr. Nearing, then you've sold out entirely!"

"That's it."

"You won't be here any more! You're — going!"

Hilda's voice was shaking. Long restraint forbade her saying the words she meant: "Going from a life work, a life love, a life ambition."

He twisted his hands about the sea bean watch charm and said: "Yes, Hil."

That night, after office hours, she walked down Nearing Street. She did not go there often now. *It was some years ago, two years, in fact, after Guy*

Nearing had left Cato for the last time, that Mr. Plaisted had begun to find the house inconvenient. "I was thinking of some alterations, Hil," he had suggested. "If you could help a little out of your salary."

"I should rather move."

"You don't like Nearing Street?"

"No."

It was unusual for the serenely poised Hilda, but since it was her salary which would make most of the changes, question was not loud. The Plaisted family moved from the little yellow-painted house which always had strings of laundry in the back yard to a white concrete one with green blinds on a new street. The boys were away and Dorrie was at home, enjoying her first parties. Life there was very comfortable and gracious.

Now as she walked along, the October sunlight made a yellow glow of the maples on Nearing Street. The children scuffled through the early fallen leaves, the scent of bonfires made the dusk pungent. From the porches where a young couple sat rocking before supper or the girls hugged their knees on the top step, waiting who might come by, respectful comments passed.

"She must get those clothes from away. There is an air."

"Now how old can Hilda Plaisted be? With that complexion you wouldn't say —"

The admiration was not unmerited. When she was seventeen the perceptive had known that Hilda would develop late. That leisurely blooming had taken place, fostered physically by the sunshine and tranquillity of Cato, fostered spiritually by the nights and days that had made her acquainted with the depth of love and its ability to pardon.

Mr. Nearing was mowing the front lawn, a task performed by the older men in Cato only when there were no sons.

"I'm glad you've come, Hildare. She seems to need cheering."

They walked slowly through the canna beds up toward the house. It was an immaculate house, as are those of elderly people who move about very little. Up in the black walnut-furnished bedroom overlooking Nearing Street, the lamp with the pink-flowered shade and the beaded fringe was already lighted. Mrs. Nearing, in her crocheted shawl had her regal air, as though being ill moved her one step higher in the ranks of those born to be served.

"I don't seem very well now, but I expect to be. Now that Mr. Nearing's retired, you see, we might go away." She smiled up wistfully: "We always talked of it."

"Now, now, Mother, when you get a little perkier."

"I had a nice letter from Guy, Hilda. That's such an interesting place where he is."

"He's still on the ranch?"

"Not much of the time. It didn't seem to be just what he wanted. He's exploring; and writing, too."

Hilda ventured no question. Mr. Nearing amplified. "I guess it a'n't come out in anything — any magazines, you know."

"Not yet, James. But," said Mrs. Nearing dreamily, "it's a very good thing for him to try. I think Guy has it in him to do so well. Don't you think so, Hilda?"

"Yes, Mrs. Nearing."

It was no untruth. Hilda had always been able to believe a little of what Guy's mother believed. Though his place was removed from her life and though she could never communicate with him again, she knew Guy. More than either of the two who sat before her, one adoring, the other resigned, she had possessed his childhood. She knew the determination obscured by perversity, the sensitiveness which pride made reckless. Hilda had decided, after Guy's third letter to her, that it would take him long to grow up.

"It's natural," said Mrs. Nearing, "for him to take to those artistic things. And I don't want him to be worried. Let him look about as much as he likes. There is time."

"Yes, Mother."

Mr. Nearing answered this as he would a com-

mand. Mrs. Nearing folded her hands and gazed away wistfully over the shadows of Nearing Street.

"Come again, Hilda. I seem to need company."

Hilda kissed Guy's mother, now the humble one when they two were together, and walked home through the peaceful quiet of Cato. She smelled the keen scent of burning leaves and heard the last shouts of children and her mind reverted inexorably to the details of the coming shipment of bones.

"Can I help you any in this business about the bones?"

Anson Boyce was at her desk again some time later. It was not customary for Boyce to consult with his department chiefs about details. There had been a feeling of friendship between him and Hilda lately, but such frequent consultations, to the mind of the temporary purchasing agent, indicated none too sure a trust in her judgment. And even if he was her friend, she would prefer a rebuke less roundabout.

"Do I seem to need help?"

One never quite got over one's awe of Boyce. He was terrifyingly businesslike now and Hilda wondered how many possible new purchasing agents he had interviewed since she saw him last.

"I understand that you have refused to pay the bill although the treasurer wants to close the yearly accounts. That is unusual."

"And careless? Or fussy? And obstinate?" At least she had found one might talk back to Boyce.

He started to make pencil checks and decided not to. "I have no intention — of interfering — with a person whom I have entrusted with a job. You have not proved that you are mistaken in this matter — yet."

The only answer to that would have been a long, terrified whistle. Hilda said nothing until — "I'm afraid I can't prove it yet. You see, I'm acting on a hunch."

"I see," said Boyce. And nothing else at all. At last: "We don't wait to see a consignment at the end of the fiscal year. We pay outstanding bills regularly, even when not prodded by the treasurer."

"Mr. Boyce," said Hilda, "it's awfully kind of you to spend time with me like this, but if I can't run the purchasing department, won't you please get someone else?"

And then they sat looking at each other. Hilda, who had thought she understood perfectly what had happened when James Nearing found he was not fit for team work with Anson Boyce, added one more shade of comprehension to that picture. Anson Boyce was choosing words.

"The method is — not the sort I understand. I have no intention of judging — except by results — My decision — is still to be made. Meanwhile — Miss Plaisted, will you marry me?"

They looked at each other again. And Hilda, who had looked into Boyce's eyes only once before when they were moved, was astonished. It is a miracle, but one of every day, to look into the face of someone distant, or even hostile, someone as impersonal as the trees along the village street or the steeple of the village church — and to find that face suddenly like the face of a small child, with emotions that anyone may read: affection, longing, timidity. Like anyone we love. Like ourselves.

So Hilda saw Anson Boyce. Boyce was no longer in the vigor she had known when she first came to the Works. There was gray in his hair; his reserved look had hardened. Breaking through it the emotional Anson never expressed in youth was nervous and halting.

"We're not so — wholly different. I have an idea about respect in marriage. Equality. I respect you — as well as love you."

It was time for Hilda to answer and Hilda was wordless. The tears had come to her eyes when he said "love." Boyce saw them and a very soft expression came into his own face. But he did not move toward her. With a shyness that was part of the child she had seen in his eyes, he waited.

"I can't."

"Can't you, Hilda? Are you sure?"

At the words Hilda herself was not sure what the *background* of disillusion, of faith, of weariness

stood for. She had never expected to know any love but the one she had known.

"I think I am sure."

He weighed that, quietly. "Someone else?"

If the talkers on all the porches of Cato could have known that even unto Hilda Plaisted, "at her age," a most eligible man had said humbly, "Someone else?" Hilda was silent a moment.

"No," she said.

"Then," said Boyce, still weighing, as intently as he did the other problems they encountered together, "I will wait. I wish I could have let you know before, not been — like this. I didn't know how to make you know."

He smiled briefly as he stood up: a most dependable chief, one able to take the responsibility for his own waiting and for Hilda's.

"I think we can work together just the same. Will you?"

She put out her hand. "If I don't make good as a purchasing agent you fire me?"

"I promise," said Anson Boyce, in the tone of a man making his first promise to the woman he loves.

And the next week the long-awaited consignment of bones arrived and the salesman, even as had been Hilda's intuition, had meant to take advantage of her and had sent a lot in no respect up to sample, not fit, as Joe Duane said, to go in sausages. The

whole purchasing department, not to mention Mike Moran and Joe Duane, had joy of the deed when Hilda refused to take the consignment and brought out the sample and the written order and her knowledge of bones to confute the salesman. Even his combination of bluster and compliments did not avail him. The final act in the successful comedy of the bones took place when they were finally removed at the salesman's order and the agency of their removal was a slaughter house.

"So that's all they were good for!" exulted Joe Duane. "He couldn't sell them anywhere else. And what does the boss say *now*?"

The boss said: "Is it all right now for me to retain you as permanent purchasing agent?"

Hilda said: "I think it is."

CHAPTER XI

Cato in April is a pleasant place. The red buds on the maple trees are just bursting then, the sky is of that very delicate robin's egg blue whose purity is almost incandescent. Yards are cleaned up by then, and spring house cleaning is in progress. On the verandahs of wooden houses, painted a tidy yellow, or green, or gray, the parlor chairs stand in luxurious publicity all day long, while tremendous renovation takes place within. Housewives in gingham dresses and large gloves attend to the hyacinth beds in the front gardens; windows are washed; cellars are cleaned and there is wholesale purchase of oilcloth and white curtains.

"He looks awfully swell," said Gertie Fowler of Nearing Street, as she perched, with her friend Grace Barber, on the railing of the Fowlers' front porch. It was the first day of the year when outdoor gossip had been possible.

"But aren't those clothes sort of queer to — go in at the waist so much? They're the kind that go with a turned-up black moustache. Only he hasn't got one. Why, say!" Grace sat up for a closer view. "I believe that's Guy Nearing!"

Gertie was immediately galvanized into action. "Do you think so? Won't he be surprised!"

The Nearings' house, aloof on its mound of lawn, did not share the activities of the street. There were no signs of housecleaning there, the green blinds were down in the parlor, the front door was closed. Front doors are never locked in Cato: Guy turned the tarnished brass handle and walked in. The old man would probably be at the shop, but perhaps they had a nurse for his mother: Mr. Nearing's letter had said she was "pretty sick." He would tiptoe upstairs and find out. But, as he turned toward the long, straight staircase, with its brown and pink flowered carpet, he heard a high, tremulous voice from the sitting room: "Who's there?"

"Why, father! You home?"

James Nearing, appearing from the open door of the sitting room, looked gray and unsubstantial in the dim light of the hall.

"I came as fast as I could, Dad. How is she?"

James Nearing stood leaning against the hatrack, a slowness, an effect of impediment in all his motions. "Why, I supposed you'd know it, Guy. You can see, can't you? She's dead."

Guy fell back into the shadow, in the dimness the old grandfather's clock ticked between them.

"Oh, Father — Father! How long?"

"Ten days now."

Long after that moment of shock, Guy realized the difference he had heard then in his father's voice. Those bald words! They were lacerating. In them was none of the colorlessness, the precise self-control of the old James Nearing, dun background for his brilliant wife and son. In the voice there was an unfamiliar abandon.

The two did not move toward one another. Too many years had they passed without a word, too many days had they lived together in that house without a gesture of intimacy. Each alone, protected by the dusky light of the hall, they took their grief in silence.

"I'm — sorry you were alone here, Father."

James Nearing nodded his head slowly. "That's all right — of course. She missed you, though. Your mother always counted a lot on you, Guy."

Guy did not answer that, nor did James Nearing look at him. Perhaps, if he had, he would have been dazed to see his son smitten by the first grief that had attacked him during his sunny, drifting years. The silence became appalling.

"Your room's ready for you." It was the old docile, conscientious tone, as though Guy's father were thinking what Guy's mother would say next.

"But, Father! Can't I do anything?"

"We might," said James Nearing, unexpectedly, "talk about that tonight, Guy. We'll be having supper pretty soon."

Guy turned slowly up the black-walnut staircase.

There was an odor about that staircase, cleanly and staid. No odor in the world had ever seemed real to Guy but that one. He had smelled it nowhere but in Cato, but the barest whiff of it in chance, unhomelike dwellings always brought before him, with the indestructible clearness of first memories, the lyre-backed chair by the newel post, the engraving of the Arch of Tiberius in its shiny black frame, and Mrs. Nearing, at the head of the stairs, welcoming her son.

"Father!" He turned with an impulsive movement. He had been about to cry out that he could not go up those stairs. But James Nearing, head bent, eyes far-set and expressionless, had plodded back to the living-room.

"You like coffee, Guy, don't you?"

They had sat through the supper of croquettes and floating island, made as Mrs. Nearing had had them made ever since she was married. The elder Nearing had not once raised his eyes to Guy's rather pitiful face. Now, about to push back his chair, he glanced involuntarily at the place opposite him where his wife used to sit. Coffee was Mrs. Nearing's idea of the way to convert a Cato supper into a metropolitan dinner.

"It doesn't matter. I've had coffee enough in Argentina to last me."

"Oh." James Nearing accepted the statement

impassively. There was, to him, something savoring of the ribald in pronouncing the letter *i* otherwise than as in *fine*, but such acts on Guy's part were beyond understanding and beyond criticism. He led the way into the sitting room. "Will you want to go out tonight?"

"Why, of course not."

"I didn't know," said Guy's father meekly, as he settled into the carpet chair, creaking on its curved support beside the table. The Rochester burner, with its flowered shade, shone cheerfully over the faded sitting room. There was electricity in Cato by this time, and the new four-room bungalows at the edge of town had it as a matter of course. But James Nearing had scarcely kept track of the fact and for Mrs. Nearing, anything which had not existed in Binghamton, New York, at the time when she left it, was not possible as good form.

The sitting room had an empty look. Helga was old and tried; the green and brown carpet covered chairs were all pushed properly into place; the lamp was at the centre of the table; the four diagonal piles of books were at the corners. Mrs. Nearing had not been an untidy person, but where were the things she used to leave about—a circular crocheted shawl, a bit of knitting, an open letter? There was no more in this sitting room than if it had been a show room for furniture of the period of the Chicago Fair.

Guy walked from chair to chair, unable to take his place in this picture. So many people had sat in those green and brown chairs—his mother, Hilda, his boyhood self. To catch the atmosphere which had once made it natural for him to sit there, was now a painful process.

"I wanted to tell you — a little bit — about the shop."

He was roused and relieved at the prospect of one of those business talks to which he used to close his ears so many years ago. If his father could be comforted that way —!

"Is she going well?"

"I guess so," said James Nearing, painstakingly. "I guess she's going real well. I a'n't there any more, you know."

"No. I didn't know."

Guy's mind was scarcely able to grasp what meaning such a statement had. For a moment he actually gaped at Cato's industrial magnate. He was wordless.

James Nearing had been watching his son's face rather timidly. He went on, with the careful, dogged air which had taken him so relentlessly through all his failures and his crises.

"Anson and I disagreed. It was — just after you left. I a'n't been very active in the company since. Seems as though we needed a younger man — more go."

He did not look at his son as he retailed this simple bit of information: his intonation did not change. But in the moment's pause that followed, Guy's mind made a lightning picture. He came back, with a sickening sense of unbelief, to the realization that ten years had passed and could not be replaced.

"Anson took over the responsibility?" he got out.

"Yes." Mr. Nearing nodded slowly. "That was about the size of it. Anson had some of the stock. And a while ago he — came to me and said he'd have to have mine."

"Why, the old skunk!"

"You're not to speak like that, Guy. I think I'll have to tell you." James Nearing very precisely folded his hands. As he sat in the patent rocker he looked rather shrunken and feeble, wistful, too. But he went on intrepidly, facing the audience to him the most strange and the most difficult in the world — his son. It was James Nearing's way, to go on when things were difficult.

"The business was going to the bad, Guy. I — I had made mistakes. Seems as though I wasn't very good at the buying and selling end. I want you should know just how it is and not blame Anson. Anson said it was going into the ground and it wasn't fair he should be tied to a failing concern. I — I guess that was true. And Anson was fair. He said he'd get out if I liked, but I must either buy or

sell. Well, I — I'd been having expenses lately and I couldn't buy."

"Expenses?"

"You went to South America about that time, of course. But that wasn't all. I —," James Nearing looked up from his tight clasped hands, " — I told you the firm had been having losses."

Guy looked at him.

"Whom do you think would make 'em good, Guy?"

"Losses to your works? Why, they could afford 'em. It's all in the game."

Guy started back physically at his father's brief look.

"When it was my mistake? No, they could not." James Nearing said, as an afterthought: "That's so. You wouldn't understand. Hil would. I told Hil I didn't let the Works suffer."

The name pierced the sentence like a thread of red-hot wire. Guy spared himself by not asking further who was meant. In such a brief monosyllable one might be mistaken.

"So you sold," he said.

His father nodded.

There was a frown between Guy's dark eyebrows. He was only just grasping what this meant to the Nearing fortunes. And it was varied emotions that made his voice sharp. "At a high figure, I suppose?"

"Well —," said James Nearing, rather appeal-

ingly. And then, "No." One thought of a soldier walking unswervingly to the cannon's mouth.

"How much?"

Guy did not mean to sound cruel. But, unconsciously, his father's meekness had induced in him the tone of an inquisitor. The elder Nearing's features were still set in that look of beseeching bravery.

"Twenty-five thousand."

"Why —!"

This time the blow to Guy was very real. Though he had never cared to measure the pleasant reaches of his father's fortune, he had judged it by his own standards. And fifty times the sum mentioned would have seemed to him only modest. In a state of shock that left his face boyishly open to the most boyish emotions, he tried to understand.

"Why —! That's exactly what you came in with!"

"Yes."

Even yet Guy Nearing was only partly aware of what had happened to him. To one unused, since he could think, to the thought of money as having a limit, the stark facts refused to define themselves. The furthest that he could see, for the moment, was the pathetic picture of the old man before him. As if it were a picturesque calamity of which he was reading, he sensed the ordeal that this confession of failure had been. And he pictured those years of

conscientious and determined labor — all the years from twenty-five to fifty-five, gone into the treadmill, and not one cent, not one scrap of honor to show for it. He got himself together in some degree and said gently:

"It isn't really so bad. That's enough to keep you in plenty of comfort. Why, in South America you could be rich on it."

His father regarded him with that impassive look, as one whom he feared and bowed to without approving. Guy, like a stunned person trying to scramble up, went on: "You want to be jolly careful how you invest it. It's quite a respectable fortune, that twenty-five thousand dollars."

Be it said to Guy's credit that his thoughts were entirely on his father. He was considering the twenty-five thousand solely as maintenance for James Nearing.

But the last question had not been answered. "What *have* you done with the money?" inquired Guy, kindly.

"I have invested it," said James Nearing, in his dogged, toneless voice, "in the Calcopyrite Smelting Company. They haven't paid any dividend for nine months."

It was at this moment that a silence of genuine grimness fell between the two. Guy tried to rally, relapsed, murmured brokenly: "It takes everything?"

"And the house. I mortgaged it."

They waited for some time. James Nearing's eyes were not on his son but on the black onyx mantel. He moved his hands restlessly once or twice and then he began to speak in a voice that was almost expressionless but had, nevertheless, a vivid, quivering thread of emotion running up and down. Now it disappeared, now it throbbed through the words, poignantly appealing.

"It was for your mother, Guy. I a'n't never been the man she expected. Somehow I didn't seem to have the stuff to go ahead and make the big plays I ought to have made. It takes courage to be in business nowadays. It takes a — a sort of dash. I didn't have it. I could go on making good knives, but I couldn't think of nothing new. I couldn't keep up with the fellows that are in the market now. I tried. That's what the trouble was. I tried for her sake to make a big play. It —" he looked up at his son, almost childishly appealing — "it was plated ware. I thought mebbe we'd get rich with that — rich like she wanted to be. It didn't go. I wa'n't the man to plan it and put it through. The plate scaled and people didn't like the patterns — I dunno. That's when the business got in a hole and Anson had to take and pull it out. I'm grateful to Anson. I wouldn't have liked the Cutlery Company to fail."

Mr. Nearing said this with an inexpressible note

of protective affection, such as he had never felt permitted to exhibit toward his son.

"But you see, it couldn't go on with me in it."

"Father! I'm darned sorry!"

James Nearing looked up, surprised at the sentiment, offended at the word.

"I'm sorry for your mother," he said simply. "It was for her I tried it."

It was Guy's turn. Out of the emotions that were bewildering him, he managed the first remark he had ever made to his father on an adult basis.

"I guess I'd better get a job."

"I was — hoping that."

The distrust on the older man's part was hardly called for. Guy's voice was sharp.

"I'll beat it to Milwaukee tomorrow. That's probably the thing to do."

His father nodded, apparently ready to accept any proposal, but in a moment he said hesitantly:

"If you could see your way to stay in Cato, Guy —"

"Could I be of any use to you?"

Guy was unusually moved tonight: he did not stop to think that this was the first time he had ever modified his plans for his father's benefit. For James Nearing to ask such a thing was unusual too, and yet, in this new mood of his, there was something more deeply himself than in the gentler one before Mrs. Nearing's death.

"I think I'd like you to, Guy. I a'n't been so well and there are things to do. You know the twenty-five thousand may be all right but — I don't know how to do in those things. There's a lawsuit about that Calcopryrite Company. Another company claims their land. It'll be settled in six months. If you could stay with me till then —"

He looked up, such an expression of appeal on his face, that Guy was moved, beyond his realization.

"Your mother — you see — it hasn't been very long. I a'n't done very well by you, but if you could —"

"Of course. Why, certainly I'll stay, Father."

James Nearing rose, heavily and by stages, from his chair. He leaned his hand on the table and stood there for a minute.

"Your mother," he said, with eyes fixed on the distance, "counted an awful lot on you, Guy."

CHAPTER XII

"You'LL be dashing out of here pretty soon?"

Guy raised a dark eyebrow. "I shan't do much dashing *in* here."

Otto Marks, a partner in the clothing store, nodded humbly. "We *are* pretty quiet."

"What's doing, Otto? What are the jobs?"

"Jobs!"

Otto's good natured jaw, flecked by a few crumbs of cocoanut, dropped open. He and the former heir to the Works were sitting in Price's Lunch Room and Guy, not quite at ease, was having some difficulty in wresting Otto from his traditional state of adoration to a more practical frame of mind.

"Lord! For *you*, Guy!" Otto was helpless. "Why, there isn't much. Most of the fellows get into something right from High School and work along. And the main place, of course, is the Works."

Guy's smile was a little wry. "No thank you — under the circumstances."

"I know how you feel, of course," Otto hastened to excuse himself. "After it's out of your father's hands. And old Boyce is sort of a crab."

"It would be somewhat to smile," admitted Guy,

not too smilingly. "But I don't suppose the Works monopolize Cato?"

Otto seemed not so sure. He disposed of the cocoanut cake in some difficulty. "All I know about"—he was actually blushing—"is the clothing store. We need a man there."

"I could sell ties, couldn't I?"

Guy's jokes, as Otto knew, were not necessarily recognizable, but he felt hotly uncomfortable at the smile he got with this one.

"Excuse me, Guy."

There was no answer. Guy, with the ease which frightened Otto, had risen and reached for the luncheon checks.

"Of course it's just to amuse yourself," Otto was laboring painfully, "while you're with the old man?"

His companion, quite the most noticeable person in the room, on whom all eyes had converged as soon as he stood up, smiled vividly.

"Yes. For a howling joke, Ot. Only not quite so funny as selling ties."

He strode through the tables, to be rejoined by a very meek Otto at the door.

"I say, Guy! I understand, of course. You ought to have something special." Then Otto brightened. "Listen here, why don't we ask Hil Plaisted? She's way up in the Works, you know, and she knows an awful lot about what's doing."

Otto never quite understood what occurred after

that. One moment he was in rather enviable conversation with a conspicuous visitor to Cato. The next moment Guy had turned on him a strange looking face, had murmured something about an engagement, and was gone. Otto, taking his toothpick, was dazed and regretful. "But of course," he soothed his misgivings, "Guy never *was* much like us."

Outside Price's, Guy paused, at a loss for any goal. It seemed to him that he had been to every possible place in Cato, even to places ludicrously impossible. He found nothing. Cato, so far as its business life went, had a system. Automatically, with the years, it shifted its crop of high school boys into the compartment of obscure drudges, the obscure drudges into rising young men, the rising young men into prominent citizens. Always, there had been one category above that of prominent citizens, and in that were James Nearing and James Nearing's heir. Cato knew that James Nearing had retired from the Works, but not under what conditions. It knew that James Nearing's heir had never held down a job and never, apparently, wanted to. Therefore Guy's overtures in the last week had been received with respectful hilarity:

"You work! Oh, come, old man!" or "Oh, come, my boy!"

Guy had at first found it easy to laugh with them; any work in Cato was so easy and colorless

compared with his own vivid flights. But finally he understood that Cato meant business. It would pay homage to the magnate's son, but it would not entrust him with any of its money.

"But, my dear sir!" This was after the laughing stage was past. "I have to begin sometime!"

"But not at the top."

Guy had never imagined that such a statement could sting him with humiliation. It had always been in his mind that some day he would, of course, start in to accomplish while all the world stood still to admire. He had never consciously given up this idea. But the start would be attended with dignity and circumstance and be at the thing for which he had found he had genius. To Guy, it had seemed there was plenty of time. Yet while he thought thus, he had drifted irretrievably beyond the point where he could take the job possible for a boy of seventeen.

Now, standing with his back against the window of Gobel's furniture store, severed by only a pane of glass from a rosewood parlor set including an arm chair, a rocking chair and two straight-backs, cushioned in green, Guy was attacked by a feeling of loneliness such as he had never known in his life. A little way down the street was the clothing store, with Otto Marks' younger brother lounging in pink shirt-sleeves at the open door: above it was the little room where Jimmy Mallison combined fire

insurance with a start at the law: on the corner, behind an immense sign, Eddie Reynolds sold phonographs and sewing machines. Everyone in Cato had made himself a place, places which Guy had despised up to this moment, places which were no part of his goal. But for him, the man who had not started, there was no place at all.

"Well, you *are* a stranger!"

It was the Cato greeting. Guy's smile had an unusual warmth as he turned to see the lady who had addressed him.

"I saw you," she continued, "two blocks off. They don't dress like that in Cato. Nor stand as if they'd never stooped over an office desk. Nor have a permanent tan that doesn't peel."

"Honest, are you, Elsie?"

"Come to lunch."

"I've had it, but couldn't I just walk with you?" Guy's manner could always be appealing on occasion, but the call this time was so genuine that the lady under the mauve sunshade smiled warmly. As they swung down Main Street, followed by the eyes of all the noon crowd, he told her: "They don't invite like that in Cato. Where've you been?"

"Oh — New York, Chicago. I left the tin manufacturer there. You might as well know — you would anyway — I'm divorced."

"I might as well know — I would anyway — that your eyes are more elfish than they ever were."

"That sounds young, Guy. We're not —"

In his suddenly smitten silence, Elsie was uncomfortable. She touched his arm to say gently: "It's nice to be back in Cato, don't you think?"

She was touched by his sober face. "Your mother! Oh forgive me!"

"I didn't get here in time."

They walked on in greater intimacy, her hand still on his arm. "But you're going to stay, Guy?"

"Yes, Elsie."

Her bungalow was a pleasant resting place, the extra ornaments, the extra formalities of Cato absent. Guy watched his cigarette smoke comfortably beside Elsie's long chair.

"Do you know, Elsie, I had forgotten about some of the proprieties of Cato. I knew, of course, that you mustn't smoke in the sitting room, or call on ladies except on Wednesday night" — his eye caught hers whimsically — "or on invitation. But I didn't remember that you mustn't have ideas?"

Elsie laughed, leaning back against cream chintz cushions. "And have you ideas?"

"Oh, come now!" He was surprisingly in earnest. Elsie, amusedly watching his profile, decided that there were resemblances to James Nearing, and told him so. Guy went on, undiverted.

"I've organized a lot of things, off and on. The students' club in Paris. And plans for the ranch. And a European tour I pulled off."

"Then what's the matter now?" She was still regarding it as a joke.

"Oh — " he shifted his long legs uneasily — "capital. It happens I want some money right away. And with those things, of course, I didn't fuss with the expense details very much. Either somebody else did it or there was money enough."

"And here they want you to fuss with details."

"Worse. They want me to have already fussed. Fussed for years. Nothing else fits you for a job in Cato."

Elsie watched her silk curtains blowing in the April breeze. "Why do you want to join the toilers, Guy?"

"Why?"

"Yes. Haven't we always had too many of them in the world? I don't see why it should be everybody's function to labor and produce things and be profoundly dull. Bauerman did, and he was a little worse than dull. He produced paper boxes. But no one expects you to produce anything, Guy."

"Look here, lady. That's carrying it pretty far."

"Of course not. You don't belong to the grubbing clan. Why not accept your function and stop such temperamental efforts at this late date? We need you to show us the charm of life."

"Look here, Elsie, I'm not quite —"

"Cato doesn't understand," said Elsie. "But I do. Cato sees everything in black and white. All work

and righteousness or all play and deviltry. You're rather tarred already, aren't you?"

"So I've found."

"Then accept it as a tribute." She looked up smiling as he touched her hand. "There are some who prefer you as you are, Guy."

"Elsie! Am I that bad?"

"Come and play with me sometimes, Guy. It's a long time since I've heard tales about the uttermost parts of the earth."

"But I've given them up, Els. I'm going to be a working man."

She laughed softly. "Don't treat me like Cato, Guy. You and I understand."

Guy walked up Maple Street humming. He was unaware that two forces, set in motion long before he was born, had been stealthily maneuvering that day, for his future. One, perhaps, was a legacy from his father and one from his mother. And his mother, as usual, had won. From the porches and the lawns, Cato's eyes followed him.

"That foreign air is queer, but he's good-looking."

"Guy Nearing doesn't get a day older."

At the corner he ran into a typical afternoon procession: a perambulator with a solemn five-year-old walking beside it, followed by two women, one old and one young, out for an airing before getting supper.

"You *are* a stranger!"

"Janey Hubbell! Can I have this baby for a buttonhole bouquet? I like it ever so much but — I think — after all you're prettier than it is."

"*She*, Guy. Sally's my third. The idea of my being pretty!"

"It's an idea I always had. But of course you helped it with molasses candy. Have you got any more?"

"Guy, aren't you absurd!"

Janey walked on glowing. Mrs. Hubbell at her side smiled too and wondered: "Will that Guy Nearing never grow up?"

It was late afternoon now and the Cato workers were pouring home. Every house door stood open and in the kitchens, women in pink and blue aprons were humming over their shining stoves. Guy, sauntering, relaxed in the late sunshine, turned another corner and saw, down the street, under the arching row of maple trees, a tall, blue-clad figure, walking swingingly.

Janey and her mother would not have thought him boyish if they could have seen Guy's face as he stood in the shadow of an alley watching Hilda. It may be boyish to be angry when one would like to be sorry, but the effect of such anger, carried over many years, is bitter. As Guy whirled down the alley and into the evening quiet of an empty street, his look would have caused Cato no envy. Hilda *had* taken the one way to make Guy remember her.

He turned into Nearing Street and approached the big brown house, not unimpressed. It was, after all, more spacious than any place which he had visited that day. There was about it an air of honorable eminence, admitted achievement. Guy, in the old days, had chafed at this, but now, with the idea of achievement before him, he felt a sort of gratitude toward the chocolate-colored mansion. After all, a man issuing from its doors could never feel himself of no account. There was a dignity inalienable from its inhabitants, setting them above other men.

Inside, it was silent. This was the hour of late afternoon when Cato houses stood garnished and expectant to greet the home-coming men. This was when Mrs. Nearing, in her striped muslin, used to stand at the top of the porch steps, ready with her one sedate kiss and her question "How was it at the Works today?" Now the square hall loomed cavernously, and from the sitting room there was not a sound. Guy, with a distaste for meeting his father's questioning eyes, turned up the dark, walnut stairs.

His room was at the back of the house, looking out over the syringa bushes and the yard where the laundry used to dry. Ever since anyone in the Nearing family could remember, there had been a mandate that no one was to interfere with Guy's room, so even now Helga, the servant who had

always known him, had stacked some broken lengths of fishing rod, a rusty mandolin and a sprung tennis racket, in the corner where they always used to stand in High School days. A row of black-bound school books still filled the book case; the High School banner hung on the wall.

Guy stood a moment in the door, looking at the square, high-ceiled room, filled with late sunshine. He had scarcely noticed it since his return, but in this still hour of the late afternoon, when every house is most at leisure and most itself, he was struck with the spaciousness and kindness of this place which had always been waiting for him. There was a row of photographs on the book case, faded but carefully dusted. He picked up the big one in the center. It was the High School class, front row seated, rear row standing. The president sat in the middle of the front row and at his side the secretary, with wide forehead and direct, unsmiling eyes, held a leather-bound book of minutes in her lap. With a violent motion Guy snatched that picture away to bury it at the bottom of a box.

Outside the street echoed with welcoming voices and the feet of home-coming men. The sparrows chirped on the lawn, the budding branches of the syringa hedge showed yellow against the grass. Guy walked to the window and leaned there, a cigarette forgotten in his hand. From this window,

when he was ten, there stretched a cableway of string, whereon a small basket made laborious trips several times a day, with messages for Hilda which could just as well have been called out of the window. The railway was Guy's idea, but it was Hilda who had painstakingly constructed it, after several trials made by him with the wrong kind of string. But it was Guy who had first tired of it, and turned to Indian playing in the woods. He stooped down now and opened the window. On the shutter there was still a frayed and grimy bit of string.

Suddenly a half-smoked cigarette described a violent arc into the spring twilight. On Guy's face was an expression of defiant bravado which must have been there often in the last few years, so deeply was it set.

"Thank God they've moved away!" was what he said. *"I couldn't have stayed in Cato."*

The gas was lighted when he joined his father in the black-walnut dining room. Mr. Nearing had looked up, when his son came in, with an eagerness lighting his pale blue eyes, then had looked down in silence. Guy, to cover the embarrassment of the question which was not asked, volunteered:

"It seems that Cato is just exactly full. There isn't room for one more person in it."

"Do you mean," asked James Nearing precisely, "that a starving man couldn't get a living in Cato?"

Guy raised a quizzical eye-brow. This literalness

of his father was standing out in astonishing relief since his mother's death.

"Oh, no. There's a grocer's boy needed at Robinson's and a handy man at the livery. Think I'd be good at those?"

"I don't know."

Guy glanced up sharply, but his father, head bowed over the cold lamb, said nothing further. He pushed his own plate away in some irritation. "Why, I have ideas enough. I can see right now two or three things that could be started in Cato. It takes capital, though." He was frowning in real perplexity.

"There isn't any capital. You understand that." James Nearing seemed to be forcing himself painfully to reiterate this confession.

"I understand."

Guy ran his hand through his black hair. The Cato dining room, with the walnut furniture and the hanging lamp whose streaked green shade dangled a beaded fringe, was beginning to look threateningly like a prison to him. "I say, Dad!" His glance was really appealing. "Why don't I go off somewhere else — Milwaukee or Chicago? One'd be much more likely to get something there. I could send you money. It wouldn't be so far."

James Nearing did not answer. The look of far-seeing resignation on his face smote Guy terribly.

"All right," he contradicted himself. "I won't."

There seemed to be something which the older man wished to say. He looked up at his son once or twice, then succumbed to inarticulateness.

Guy found nothing to say. He was finding these evenings with his father more and more difficult. So far as he could remember, he had never had any conversation with his father. They had communicated through Mrs. Nearing, made their jokes to her and voiced their disagreements. Their last talk on a subject vital to them both had been when Guy was eleven. At that time his father had maintained that he should be thrashed for some piece of careless mischief. Mrs. Nearing had felt outraged and her well-bred voice had trembled. She had had her way, but since then Guy could not remember hearing his father's opinion about anything.

"Two lines in the paper today about Calcopyrite," said Guy.

"I seen them."

"Apparently it's a matter of proving their right to the claim. I suppose you looked it up?"

"No. I didn't."

"Didn't look it up before you invested?" Guy did not dissemble the shock in his voice: the precaution seemed to him, at this safe distance, such a natural one to have taken. But James Nearing remained expressionless.

"I looked up about the ore being good. Seemed as though that would be the only thing."

"Oh, I suppose it will be all right, Father." Guy felt called on to assume a protecting attitude, the older man looked so withered and stooped, with his trembling hand outstretched toward the custard saucer.

"Maybe," said Mr. Nearing.

They finished supper in silence, Mr. Nearing carefully turned down the light under the fringed shade and they crossed to the sitting room.

"Guy — where did ye try for work?"

Mr. Nearing, in the patent rocker, his feet in the green and red carpet slippers on the footstool before him, sat holding the damply folded *Evening Citizen* in his hands. Even yet Guy had not grown used to hearing his father call him by his name: there seemed something artificial about it. He looked up from his search for matches on the mantel piece. "Everywhere, I should say."

Mr. Nearing disapproved of smoking. He watched his son without speaking and Guy remembered.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Father."

"What did they say?"

"When I asked for work?" Guy shrugged impatiently. "What I deserved, I suppose. They said I didn't have any experience and they had no use for ideas without details to them."

"Ideas?"

Guy's foot was violently kicking the fender behind him. His father's eye followed it. It was the

elaborate brass fender which had come from Chicago when the Nearings first set up housekeeping, and had held an unaccountable place in Mr. Nearing's esteem ever since. Guy used to be ordered not to fool with it. It was many years, now, since orders had been given to him in that house, but sins against the fender found somehow a direct route to his conscience. Hastily he removed his foot to drum with it on the floor.

"Yes, I suggested two or three things. Nobody wanted 'em."

"What are ye going to do?"

"I don't know, Father." Guy's hurt, defiant tone was covered by a laugh. He had hardly expected the loss of self-esteem that Cato had caused. "I don't seem very well equipped for work. Too much education."

"Do ye mean ye can't get a job?"

Guy had been used to consider his father a person without feelings and without imagination; he would have smiled with contempt at the idea that the man ever indulged in passion. But since Mrs. Nearing's death, it was as though a brilliant screen had been removed from before this quiet, homely man. That tone had been arresting.

"I'm telling you," shot out Guy, "I haven't found any."

Mr. Nearing sat quite still, his wrinkled hands clasped on the paper, and suddenly his son thought

how old he looked. There was a moisture around his eyes, either from weakness or from the easy tears of age. This man was a failure. He had promised great opportunities to his son and had never sent out a word of warning. And now, reduced to helplessness by the machine he had himself started and could not control, he sat there doggedly making some silent request that another man should sacrifice all his own personality and follow in those same footsteps.

Guy would have liked to explain. In this, the first vital conversation that they two had ever had together since they were both men, he would have liked to give his father some conception of the ideal of beauty and space which had instigated his wanderings and made the cramped routine of the factory abhorrent. Impossible. They were two different people, with barely a glimmer of comprehension, one for the other. There was only one thing that James Nearing would understand — surrender. He sat waiting for it, dogged, helpless, with the lamp shining on his bent, beaten head.

“What do you want me to do, father?”

“The Works?” The answer was so ready that it seemed as though James Nearing’s silence must have been thinking it for days.

“But —! The Works!”

“Hil made good there.”

Guy turned away. Around him the green sitting

room with the carpet-covered chairs seemed to lower with appalling significance. It was in this room that his father, his mother and he had discussed his future a long time ago. That time he had been able to escape. To what purpose? His sense of rebellion was deep. He resented the whole elaborate system which had promised him unlimited opportunity and then withdrawn it; kept him in ignorance and then caught him unprepared in this trap. It would be better for sons to be brought up in the beginning to face a hard pull than to awaken to it late, like this. Guy pushed a green chair violently out of his way.

"Oh, very well, Father. You have the right to say. I understand it's only for the six months until we hear about the Calcopryite. And meantime, if I have to go into the Works — I have to."

"I'm glad, Guy. I always thought —"

"It'll be a surprise to Anson."

"Anson'll do right by ye. I'll telephone him. Of course, ye'll have to work up."

"Oh, Lord, Father!" Guy did not venture the laugh he had intended. The old man's fixed look was almost sacramental; his eyes seemed set on the vision of the Works as he had once seen them, with his son at the center. Uneasily Guy tried to throw off his own apprehension:

"We'll give it a try, anyway."

The Works, next day, looked a dilapidated and

gloomy place. In spite of their growth there was an old-fashioned unimposing air about the tumbled brick buildings and the corrugated iron sheds huddled inconsequentially in the muddy yard, with the freight spur back of it. Guy had occasionally made suggestions to his father, out of his flashes of perception and scraps of foreign experience:

"I'd arrange my new buildings like this," or "Why not try out that new idea?"

"Our business," James Nearing had always said for his only answer, "is making good knives."

Guy had shrugged, and his secret thought had been "When *I* have the factory —!"

Now his father had telephoned with pathetic eagerness to Anson Boyce, and Boyce had shown himself politely ready to find some sort of occupation for James Nearing's son.

"No experience?"

"Sorry."

"No acquaintance with our products?"

"I plead guilty, Mr. Boyce."

Guy's appealing grin went unanswered while the manager made checks on a piece of paper. In a growing discomfort, Guy watched the other man's pursed lips and impersonal frown. He had not been inside the factory office since he was a schoolboy. Then he had used to dash in, saluted by all the underlings with comradely respect, himself saluting *the manager* in much the same way. Boyce had,

in Guy's eyes, held something the position of a steward to the heir apparent. Mr. Nearing had insisted on some measure of respect from his youthful son to the Manager, ten years his senior: Boyce had called Guy by his first name. What Boyce's attitude had been, Guy had never speculated.

"I intend to do all I can for you, Mr. Nearing."

It was a tone a former stock girl might have recognized. Guy felt cold.

"I'm sure that's — generous."

The other cast him a direct look from his hazel eyes. Compared with the calm glance of Boyce, who had known Guy from childhood, the scrutiny of sceptical Cato merchants was as nothing. Guy began to be angry.

"The question to be settled first, Mr. Nearing, I think is this: do you intend to make a permanent thing of this?"

"Really, Mr. Boyce —!"

Boyce, making his checks, did not glance up again. "Our really good positions — of course — require experience."

The sound from Guy was almost a snort.

"If you merely want to pass the time — you can get a living here. If you want something better — there is a career. But we should have to help you work up."

Boyce glanced up now and his look was direct and honest. He meant just as he had said.

But the weighty finality of the thing seemed to smother Guy. Anson Boyce, his father's clerk, sitting at the chief's desk where Guy should have been and offering, with friendly patronage, a lifetime of supervised toil to the man who stood as an applicant before him!

"No favors here, eh!" Guy could not help it. Boyce turned to his checks.

Very nearly Guy flung out of the room. But there was, as Elsie had surprisingly glimpsed, some stratum of James Nearing's obstinacy in him. He stopped, with a good deal of his debonair gallantry gone, and snapped out: "I came here for work, Mr. Boyce. What have you got?"

Boyce's face, always a little wooden to Guy's mind, betrayed no change of expression. "I shall need a man who is acquainted with our raw materials. The place which is open now would not be your permanent one. I will shift you through the departments as fast as possible. For the present, however, if you will go over to the purchasing department —"

"The purchasing department!"

Boyce looked somewhat curiously at his visitor evidently ready with objections so soon. Guy's face was white and Boyce's expression, seeing it, hardened. He did not elucidate further, waiting to see if the new applicant for work had decided to *withdraw* his intention.

"Who is the head of the purchasing department?"

"I have purposely not mentioned the name earlier. When a woman has attained the rank of department chief here, I do not wish to induce prejudice by calling attention to her sex before it is necessary. If you want the position I spoke of, you may apply to Miss Plaisted."

CHAPTER XIII

THE sun was blazing into Hilda's little office that spring morning, shining on the brass handles of the filing cases and the bronze hair of Miss Kelly bending over one of them. Hilda loved this grimy place where the brass handles were almost the only things to shine. Its large window looked out on the yards where the piles of lumber lay and where the drays rattled back and forth to the stock room with their loads of bales and kegs. Over in the gap between the two new warehouses of corrugated iron, she could see a bit of the sunny street of Cato, with a few dogs and children rolling in the morning dust. Mike Moran of the forge shop stamped shouting across the yard to the stock room, inquiring at the top of his lungs where the blankety that blankety-blank lot of new dies had got to. George Bright, the assistant stock clerk, with a pencil over his ear, stood at the door of the stock room in spirited altercation with the truck driver who had left a keg of ten-penny nails on the station platform instead of at George's feet.

The ground-glass door of Hilda's small partitioned sanctum was open and she could see the two

rows of desks with their bent heads, backs turned toward her. Smythe was ferreting swiftly in the filing cases and calling sharp questions to Miss Love as to the whereabouts of a quotation card; Littlejohn plugged industriously through a set of invoices; Miss Mahoney clacked her typewriter in the farther corner. It was a very large and impressive department compared to the one Hilda had first entered, and its efficiency was largely due to the quiet young woman in the blue-gray suit, who sat rapidly initialing bills and sorting them into the out-basket. She hardly looked up at the knock on the door: people did not take knocks seriously at the Cutlery Works.

"Come in," said Miss Kelly, and left with a pile of papers for the manager's office.

She had nothing to say when he first stood before her. She had to stay breathless, for just a moment, to see if the line of his head was as she remembered it, if the shoulder where her head had once been, was the same. She had no courage to look into his face immediately. It was enough, while she tried to quiet her heart beats, to realize that it was Guy standing near her, nearer than she had thought he would ever stand again.

"Guy! You've come to see me!"

She had risen from her desk, both hands outstretched. Hilda had known, from the hour that Guy came to Cato, and she had hoped. She did

not know what she awaited when he should seek her out. Surely not love — that thought had been put away long ago. But, at least, that the soreness might be taken away, that something would be said between them to blot out a scarring memory.

Hilda was not unwise after these years. Perhaps, with any one but Guy, she would have been ready for the sort of bitter conscience that makes mere casual friendliness impossible. She would have known that a man who steels himself against someone he has hurt, is not unaware that he has done a hurt. But, in Guy's presence, the years fell from Hilda and left her a little girl. She had to fight against tears when he jerked out:

"Mr. Boyce sent me. About a job."

Hilda had turned away. She could not pity Guy just then, but she might have. It had not occurred to her that Guy would not have cared to work under her, even in high school days. She had never clung to pride as her whole support. She had never plunged recklessly into a task against which every sense rebelled, to find it topped by an unjustifiable, unendurable one. It was really to Guy's credit that he had not turned and bolted in the hall, as he stood looking at her closed door. She thought he was unaware of what stood between them: he was not. But to his distorted vision, the very act of coming to ask for work had put him so far beneath her that *any personal words* would be presumptuous.

"Oh," said Hilda. She caught her breath. "Yes. Mr. Boyce spoke of our having an extra man. We need a price checker."

He waited silently, with set teeth.

"You haven't — any experience — at office work?"

"No, Miss Plaisted."

Hilda was trying painfully to gather herself together. It was her business to settle this new cog among the parts of her machine but her mind refused to place her one unreal, golden memory, in the live routine of her office. One sacred part of her had remained almost untouched since childhood. That part saw Guy Nearing as a radiant being far above such plodders as even the head of the purchasing department. Guy Nearing as a clerk she could not realize.

"You think experience necessary?" His self-control was going.

"Oh, no. No. You'll learn, of course. The work is easy. I'm sorry we have no better position just at present."

Hilda had meant that from the depths of her heart: she was puzzled at the ironic smile that crossed his face.

"I see."

"It is not well paid, but it is very responsible work. There are a good many things I might be able to turn over."

The appeal, as humble as any Hilda had ever made in the far away days when Guy was a glorious chief and she his lowly follower, passed by unrecognized. His face was so set that it hurt her.

"I'm sure we — shall be glad to have you here. Can you go to work immediately?" She had avoided speaking his name.

"Yes, Miss Plaisted."

As she turned to press the buzzer for Smythe, Hilda felt a lump in her throat that almost choked her. Guy started at the sound of the buzzer. She had forgotten how alien all these office customs must seem to him. Perhaps he disliked it or thought there was something menial in being summoned that way. Was she to be haunted by fears of that sort through all the acts of her office life hereafter? Hilda's heart was heavy and so was that of the man who stood before her. Undoubtedly they both wished, for the interview just past, any possible words but those which had been said. Undoubtedly they were aghast at the barriers they had set themselves. But Hilda, with eyes almost conquered by tears, turned back to her desk. Guy strolled across the room. So, in silence, they waited for Smythe.

"I am taking on a new man, Mr. Smythe." Hilda's voice, by the magic of habit, had recovered its pleasant, businesslike quality. "This is — Mr. Nearing. Will you give him a desk and explain *about the work?*"

The office manager looked up with ready interest at the mention of the name, but decided that references to the former owner of the Works were out of order. His eyes were a little puzzled, but he said heartily:

"Glad to meet you, Nearing. Come right this way."

Hilda watched them as they passed through the door into the outer office. Though her heart had received a blow that told it to shut and turn away, her eyes would not be sated with looking at Guy. Hilda had remembered, whether she would or no, the color of the hair that used to brush her cheek, the shape of the shoulder against which hers had lain. For many years she had looked for these things and, of all the men who had passed before her eyes, none had seemed to have them. His back was turned, and for a moment which must be her only greeting, she could look at the man who had once been hers.

The two men were bending over a desk now and Smythe was slapping a folder of papers on it. She could see Guy's profile and she grew cold at the realization that he had jerked his head in a way she had forgotten. He smiled fleetingly at Smythe and Hilda could have cried out that he would give that familiar smile to her.

"Gave him a bundle of back bills to check," said Smythe, returning.

"Did he seem — to like the work?"

This was, probably the oddest question that Smythe had ever heard a department head ask. And Hilda noticed that he evaded it.

"Ain't he the son of our Mr. Nearing?" inquired Smythe. "That used to run the factory."

"Yes."

"Too bad this boy wasn't brought up to work," mused Smythe, "though I remember he was bright as a button in Sunday School."

Hilda had heard that too.

"You will help him, won't you? All you can?"

"Sure," agreed Smythe. And if he had his private opinion of the new arrival, he did not feel called on to mention it.

"Something queer there. I hear there ain't much money."

That day and the weeks that followed it, made, to Hilda, all the other colorful moments of her life look pale. She had never supposed that, as long as she lived, she would spend her days in the same room with Guy. It was not quite the same room. The creaking length of the purchasing department was divided from the purchasing agent's little office by a ground-glass door. Sitting behind this door, generally open, Hilda could look down the length of the outer room with its six desks, two abreast. The backs at the desks were turned to her and the second on the right was Guy's.

He had sat like that in school, and she behind him. She had learned as she would never know anything else in the world, the point made by the black hair at the back of his neck, the little tricks with pencil and eraser. When on the second day of his presence she saw him turn round, rumpling his hair with his elbow after an absurd old habit, she could have dashed from her place in the private office to take her rightful position behind him and answer his question. But it was the filing clerk to whom he had spoken and who answered.

"Yeh. We write it in this column. It does get sort of tejiious."

Probably it had never really occurred to Hilda that work in her office could be tedious. To her work was not pleasant or unpleasant, but necessary or unnecessary. And more particularly it had never struck her that the position of subordinate was discreditable. It may be a feminine prerogative to be an underling without loss of caste. But she understood, not because she knew the work but because she knew Guy, how he regarded it. She tasted one result, in those days, of her years of labor. She had the right to give Guy orders and because of that he found the sight of her unbearable.

Hilda was helpless. She would have been unfeignedly thankful to leave her swivel chair and her private office and offer them to Guy. Just then they meant nothing to her. These privileges, won

by years of work, and work which had been her only refuge, became an inescapable regret. Hilda would have been glad to wipe out her years of accomplishment and be, even at twenty-seven, a stock girl.

She passed his desk, sometimes, leaving her office and going down the long room. He was never looking at her but after she had passed she knew that, without a change of position, his eyes could follow her. With what expression? In the mornings, she made it a point to stop and exchange greetings, though she did not know whether this made him feel less her subordinate or more. He always rose, making Littlejohn and Smythe uncomfortable with memory of their own lapses.

"Good morning, Mr. Nearing; is the work all right?"

"Yes, Miss Plaisted."

Smythe had something to say about the church social and Littlejohn blushing answered questions about his sister's baby. Guy only waited in strained rigidity until she passed.

"Is Mr. Nearing getting on all right?"

She resorted to Smythe who stood chattering by her desk, the out-basket under his arm. It was one of Smythe's understood duties to keep her confidentially informed as to the merits of the working force. Hilda, however, had waited in vain for any word of commendation about Guy. The kindly Smythe was a little slow about answering.

"Why — as well as could be expected, I s'pose."

"He is —" Hilda forced herself reluctantly to explain and do it in an ordinary tone — "he is not accustomed to this kind of work."

"I should say not!" Smythe snorted. "Looks like he don't know a row of prices from a calendar. And," he added under his breath, "cares less."

She understood how little Guy would care for rows of figures. There had been, certainly, no special consideration on Anson Boyce's part in offering a man of his sort the routine duties of a clerk. But Boyce was not accustomed to considering the differences in men. There was about the manager an unyielding quality, born of his steady will power, which made him consider all success equally difficult and all men under equal obligations. That, too, was Hilda's creed. Yet she felt a sense of outrage that it should be applied to Guy. Guy was beyond rules.

"Suppose you ask him to come here for a moment. I may be able to explain some things."

She would have been so glad to explain, if they could have sat side by side as they used to in the Nearings' sitting room, when Guy was too impatient to work out the algebra problems and Hilda did the plodding for both! But she realized, as soon as she saw him, that those days were over forever. Guy stood beside her desk, so near that she could have touched his hand with hers, and said nothing.

"I wonder if I could help you." Having glanced up, she lowered her eyes quickly without speaking his name. "We've worked out a rather simple system of filing the prices on quotation cards as they came in."

"I see."

"It looks tiresome but it gives one a pretty good idea of the changing market."

"I see."

"If you will compare the prices on the bills and keep the quotations up to date —"

"Yes."

She was not sure whether he had heard, he was looking past her so doggedly.

"If I can help you at any time —"

"Thank you."

He waited a minute, still not looking in her direction. Hilda found no more to say.

Hilda made no more overtures, they hurt too much. She was reduced to watching through the door his comings and goings. And despite her knowledge that he wished her away, she found herself thrilling to this nearness with the old feeling, both maidenly and maternal. There was joy in it as well as pain and she caught herself wishing that Guy, for his own happiness, might know the feeling, too, so heartwarming it was.

It was nothing heartwarming that he felt. She *understood* too well the indications of his sudden

bursts of speed, the disgusted weary intervals, the cynical jests which electrified Miss Mahoney across the aisle. Miss Mahoney, Miss Love and even Littlejohn, Hilda noticed, hung on his words. It was always so with Guy. People gathered about him the moment he gave them a chance. If he chose to lead a cause the most desperate or the most fantastic it would never lack supporters.

But he seemed to choose deliberately to be destructive.

"Do you find the Works queer after abroad, Mr. Nearing?"

Hilda, ready to go out to lunch, had paused because Guy and the two stenographers were standing just outside the glass door.

"I don't find them exactly up to date."

Hilda knew that Guy smiled as he said this and that the two girls were not exactly at home with the smile.

"What'd you do if you were the boss? Have new hardwood floors in all the departments?"

Miss Love's flight of imagination was so immense that Guy must have been amused. Hilda was surprised to hear him say:

"Oh, I'd get in an efficiency expert to bring the offices up to date. And have tabulating and sales figuring machines. And I'd reorganize the shops with modern machinery and higher wages and get in boys from the country instead of unskilled immi-

grants. And I'd tear down the whole place and build it up scientifically. And I think I'd have a regular system of shop representation — workmen and clerks send delegates to discuss things with the management."

"Gee, I'd like that!"

The two girls had fallen back bedazzled, especially at the easy use of the first person singular. Smythe, having tidied his desk for the noon hour, paused beside the group.

"Maybe you'd rather blow the factory up and be done with it, Mr. Nearing."

"I'd be frightened," said Miss Mahoney.

Guy cast her a brief, vivid smile. "Don't be alarmed. It isn't my factory."

Hilda opened her door and the girls, embarrassed, scattered. "I was interested in what you said about shop representation," she got out quickly before he could turn away. "Do you know whether it's been tried anywhere and what the arrangements would be? It might be worth considering. I confess I hadn't thought of it before."

He looked her straight in the eye. "Neither had I. It was a flight of imagination."

She considered that flight a little in some of the following days, when her thoughts so often centred about Guy. Often, in the old days, he had had flashes of inspiration on a subject blank to her. But *the idea* had no connection with her pleasantly

working office. Deprived of his point of view, she could not envisage it further. If Guy only cared enough about his own ideas to see them through!

"Mr. Nearing says the funniest things," Miss Kelly confided to her during dictation the next morning. She was accustomed to chat with Hilda. They all were. An atmosphere of informality still irradiated the Works. "He says if people work at a job that isn't interesting they ought to be paid more than the boss, because the boss is having fun. Do you suppose he really means it?"

Hilda, to whom Guy's description of a boss hardly applied at that moment, sighed.

"I suppose the whole system of work and pay is complicated."

"Well, *I* said," Miss Kelly was registering in the company's good books: "I said 'I suppose we can all work up if we're worth it.' And he said, 'At my age?' Say, he's not so awful old, is he, Miss Plaisted?"

Hilda repressed the impulse to say "twenty-eight next August." "Possibly," she reflected, "starting at the bottom has not the inspiration at twenty-seven that it has at seventeen." With a reversal of all orderly traditions she inquired of Smythe:

"Don't you think we could promote Mr. Nearing?"

"Promote!" Smythe's jaw dropped open. Hilda had, for the first time, the disagreeable sensation of

knowing she had been silly in the eyes of her subordinate.

"I thought, Mr. Smythe — this work is particularly routine and uninteresting. He may have the sort of mind that isn't adapted to it."

"Adapted!" Smythe repeated again.

Hilda flushed. "Naturally, if his work doesn't seem to merit it. I shall go by your report."

Smythe had a grievance. In her own absorption the thing had passed unnoticed by Hilda, but now, having shut the ground glass door, the good-natured little man plumped down beside her to let it out.

"Work, Miss Plaisted! That fellow don't know what work is. *He's not here to work!*"

Hilda, Smythe's friend since she was ten years old, understood as few others would, the outraged ideals that glittered in his middle-aged blue eyes, as Smythe particularized.

The new man was nothing less than an insult to an industriously working office. The new man misplaced papers and forgot errands; he kept the whole office force listening, after the lunch hour was over, to some "contraptious" story invented to tease Miss Mahoney. He was lax in the solemn service of accuracy.

"I don't think he realizes —"

"Realize, is it?" Smythe pushed a paper under her nose. "Here's the last bunch of bills that gink's been checking up. Look a' here. Here they've

charged phosphor bronze half a cent more than they quoted. Does he spot it? No. Here's the initials G. N. Better write it N. G., I say. Does he think he's here for his health?"

Hilda sighed, realizing that Guy's attitude, otherwise translated, was something of the sort.

"You see, Mr. Smythe, Mr. Nearing's training has been of a very different sort. I imagine routine is really hard for him."

Smythe snorted.

"He has a mind very quick at general ideas. I suppose he finds detail uncongenial."

Smythe gave expressionless reception to this careful analysis. He did not ask how Hilda knew that the new man had any talent for general ideas.

"That's the way he talks — when he says anything. Always got some swell idea to turn the Works upside down and spend a million dollars and never cares a rap how you'd do it. Say, ain't that fellow never worked?"

"He has not had to, Mr. Smythe." Hilda's tone finished the conversation.

But the office manager, standing firmly planted beside her desk, had a further complaint to plant.

"If you think this office is going well, when that fellow don't care what hour of the day he stops work and begins grouching or firing jokes —! You'd think he owned the place."

After this unexpected illumination they both sat

still. Smythe finished hastily. "It's a bad example for the girls, you know. Though I guess Littlejohn keeps pretty steady."

"I see." Hilda sighed deeply. "You had better speak to him about these mistakes. I think I will not — just yet."

"Speak to him! All right," agreed the balked Smythe. "But you'll see what a lot of good it'll do, Hilder. That feller thinks he's the king of England — with a grouch."

It happened to be that very afternoon that the incident occurred which crystallized Guy's attitude into revolt. That was almost inevitable with Guy, but Hilda had hoped against hope that the situation could be made tenable. After she had seen his look when she summoned him by the buzzer she knew it could not.

In the first few days of deep hurt and yearning, she had avoided summoning him to her office though she knew the event would gain in significance as it was postponed. Unexpectedly, this afternoon it was upon her. There was a conference in her office between Boyce, herself, and the representative of the Hurley Company, about a confidential price for steel flats. Smythe had mentioned that morning that one of the Hurley letters was in Guy's hands, and Smythe was out of the office. The letter happened to be needed and the men were in a hurry. Hilda supposed Smythe had told Guy the number

of rings which constituted the summons for his desk, and she pressed the buzzer. Her eyes met his as he entered. Boys at school used to be afraid of Guy when he looked like that. It was a look of cold rage he shot at her, saying plainly that he would have liked to strangle her where she sat.

"Will you get the Hurley Company's letter of the 24th, Mr. Nearing?"

He disappeared from the door without a word. Boyce and the Hurley man continued their discussion. Hilda, for the moment, did not heed the argument in which it was her business to furnish the facts. Down the room she could see Guy's head bent over the desk; he had not, as she feared, left the building on the spot. But it must have been pure nervousness which caused the delay while he raced through several wrong files for the letter. Boyce bit his lip and glanced out of the door, the Hurley man openly made concessions to this woman-run office.

"Why aren't your letters kept sorted?" snapped Boyce, when Guy reappeared.

The manager was generally careful not to interfere in Hilda's office arrangements but the Hurley man's attitude had nettled him. And it is fair to say that keeping letters sorted was, to Boyce, among the highest virtues.

"Thank you, Mr. Nearing," said Hilda.

She could have sobbed at the necessity that called

her to turn briskly back to her conference. For the moment she could have been angry at Guy that he should object so absurdly to a rebuke from Anson Boyce. Yet she knew that even if she could have detained him and said kind and humble things, it would have been no use. Guy had always met disagreeable things with anger.

She knew that things were changed after that — there was no use in her trying to help. Guy, savagely avoiding her, made some effort to carry off the work respectably, but she saw in his eyes the reiterated question: "How can I get out of here?" Hilda, whose whole life had been spent in the unworried doing of the next duty, could hardly wrench herself to sufficient understanding. It seemed worse to him, she supposed, than she knew. But there were times when she wanted to put her head down on her roll top desk and cry like a little girl.

It was after one such time that Anson Boyce entered for a conference. If Hilda's eyes were wet, it was so unbelievable that he probably decided it was the sun. There was always something deferential about Boyce's manner to Hilda. She had grown to rely on its unobtrusive loyalty, the kindness that made work easier than she knew. Boyce was sometimes hard to others, not to Hilda. But when she saw him now, calmly commanding in the place where Guy should have been, she had a momentary feeling of rebellion.

"Things going all right, Hilda?"

"Yes, Anson, I'm — tired."

"That's not usual for you." His concerned, estimating look frightened her. But Boyce began to consider obtaining Hilda's welfare as carefully as obtaining a consignment of steel.

"If you cared to go away for a while —"

"Go *away*! Oh no!"

"I'm afraid there's too much pressure on you." He sat, thoughtfully eyeing a paper on her desk as if he contemplated making checks on it.

"Your office isn't undermanned?"

"You sent me another man a while ago."

"Oh, that reminds me. I think we'd better replace that Nearing. He seems a complete failure."

Hilda started, miserably aware that Boyce took the movement as a sign of nervousness, possibly degeneration.

"Oh. Hardly that."

"No? I've kept an eye on him more or less. I feel under some obligation to his father. But it seems to me the man has no intention of buckling down to business."

"He — has some very interesting general ideas. He was talking about the labor situation the other day. He mentioned a scheme for workmen's representation that was quite unusual."

"Workmen's representation! Does Nearing happen to know anything about the men in the shops?"

Or how much we pay them? Or what their qualifications are?"

"I suppose not. I only wanted to show you that there are some sides of the work that interest him."

"I see."

At Boyce's uncombative reception of this, Hilda flushed to the roots of her hair. There was not another department chief whom the manager would not have called up short for such a statement. Her association with him had been close in these years, an exhilarating team work whose roots in emotion neither of them examined. But Boyce's attitude toward her was based on respect, Hilda knew, and it moved her to the depths of her mature, working self, to realize that he was now making concessions to her very feminine weakness for a picturesque young man.

"If Mr. Nearing proves really unsatisfactory, I shall let you know, of course."

The manager looked troubled. "I owe his father something. You understand — don't you? That was a square deal, my buying him out —"

"But hard," he had perhaps meant to say, and Hilda was thinking it. Yet she could hardly blame the man. He cared for the work as well as James Nearing, and he was the better man. He rose, still abstracted. Boyce, when in thought, had not the black fiery quality of Guy. His face was a little heavy, and never, since childhood, had been trained

to express any emotion. But when he turned to Hilda, there was a certain troubled gentleness in his eyes. "I think you know best. Do what you feel is right about it."

That trust of Boyce's was, to Hilda, a heavy weight. There could be no doubt of the new spirit of disharmony in the office. The one wheel out of gear passed on the friction to Littlejohn, who had to do extra work on extensions, to Miss Love, held up on the filing because Guy's quotation cards were delayed, to Miss Mahoney, who had to retype more than one letter when Smythe had discovered that Guy's checking of a price must be corrected.

Probably Guy was unaware of it. He seemed, when he sat staring with set teeth over the dusty huddle of the yard, unaware of everything except his own thoughts. It was a crucial time for Guy, this first attempt to work, too late, and at a humiliating task. Fate might have planned some easier test but to bring success out of this one, both Hilda and Guy were powerless.

"He won't do, that's all." Thus said Smythe. And Hilda knew it was true.

The success and efficiency of her office was vital to Hilda. She cared, not in principle, but with a vigorous enthusiasm and joy in the work, that her organization should be a good one. It was her own creation, her second love, to which she had given her maturity. And deliberately, for her own selfish

reasons, she was allowing its driving power to be sapped.

"Wouldn't he" — she made one last appeal to Boyce — "wouldn't he be more interested somewhere else?"

Boyce, Guy's opposite, had formed an opinion many years ago as to his former employer's son. "I can't see that a man who won't buckle down to work would be in place anywhere."

Hilda was silent.

"Call him down or fire him," snapped Boyce. Then, with that unusual perception he always had where she was concerned, he added: "If you find it an unpleasant job, send him to me."

"Oh no!" Her words had been quick. "I — I will speak to Mr. Nearing."

CHAPTER XIV

HE could see her, through the open door. It seemed to Guy that he could always see her, even when his back was turned. She sat at the big oak desk, with all the drawers and pigeon holes, a firm, inescapable figure, with her quietly turning head and masterful hands. His own head turned violently whenever the sweep of those blue eyes approached him. It seemed to Guy that work in the creaking room, where the dust motes were always dancing through the heated air, was a nightmare compound of long, futile strings of figures and watching to avoid those eyes.

"Twenty-five lbs. No. 14 soft brass wire at 30 cents a lb.: \$6.50. Ten feet $\frac{5}{8}$ in. phosphor bronze rod at 35 cents a foot: \$3.50 —"

"Hey, Nearing, this Munson bill can't be filed before the forge shop has seen it. There's an O. K. missing."

"Sorry," Guy crushed the returned bill into its proper pile.

"Should think people might be a little careful," Smythe muttered.

"Shipped by freight from Pittsburgh August 17, as per your order —"

"What's the price on bones that Steinitz quoted? The main office wants to know quick. Get a hustle, can't you, Nearing?"

The flies buzzed in the blazing emptiness of the yard; by the old mill dam the water lay filthy and scum-covered, marked by viscous rings; from the freight spur, raucous voices shrieked and shrieked again the same nasal command; the old building reverberated maddeningly to the whirl of old machines, grinding out cheap, unbeautiful things.

It would be hard to say how things might have gone with Guy had he had any other chief than Hilda. Certainly, now and then while walking through the yards he had had stirring glimpses of work as it might be, varied and stimulating, with no haunting loss of dignity. He had always intended to work like that some time, but not in the very place where he had always figured as the heir apparent. And not under the eyes of Hilda.

Probably neither James Nearing nor Boyce nor Hilda, who took pleasureless duty so for granted, had any idea how Guy revolted at adding up the price of metal all day for some one else to make decisions. They had been subordinates at the proper time, not sunk ingloriously to it from a heritage of superiority. Yet even this ordeal he might have weathered with a somewhat different attitude, if it had not been for Hilda.

It was Hilda's presence that set his thoughts to

whirling so violently that attentive work was almost an impossible thing. It was Hilda's maddening assistance at this fiasco of his, over which she had every right to exult. He might have thought that he owed Hilda something once, might for years have kept that memory more vivid than he acknowledged. But not while Hilda sat in a private office and directed him to bring papers to her desk.

"Sss! Mr. Nearing!"

"Yes, lady."

Miss Mahoney, who considered Guy her allotted young man, leaned across the aisle.

"I'd quit lookin' out of the window if I was you. The big boss is just outside the door."

Guy had been deciding how funny the whole thing was. Rawson at the ranch would laugh.

"Good-morning, Mr. Smythe. Good-morning, Littlejohn."

Anson Boyce entered at the door toward which all the desks faced. Smythe hovered respectfully about his progress; Miss Mahoney put on a devoted burst of speed; Littlejohn stood up.

"Good-morning. Good-morning." The chief passed the lesser desks almost unseeing. "Ah, I *hoped* you would have the new catalogue from those Pittsburgh people—" In a glow of important matters he disappeared behind Hilda's glass door.

Guy saw no figures for the few minutes immediately after Boyce had passed. That often happened.

In the first days of his coming to the Works, he had sometimes been able to visualize the end of this infinite drudgery. That was before he realized that nothing he said had value for anybody; that his suggestions had about the weight of Miss Mahoney's.

"Did you know about Herb Littlejohn? He's been raised to twenty a week." Miss Love, across the aisle, was confiding to Miss Mahoney.

"Grand!" nodded Miss Mahoney. Littlejohn was above Guy.

"500 lbs. merchant bar rounds and flats as follows: 2 pieces 25 ft. $\frac{3}{8}$ in. rod, 5 ditto $\frac{1}{2}$ by 1 in., 6 ditto $\frac{3}{8}$ by $\frac{1}{2}$ —"

"Is that your buzzer, Mr. Nearing?" Guy started up with his eyes fierce. "No," he listened. "It's Smythe's."

Smythe disappeared behind the glass door.

"Equals 150 lbs. at \$2.25 per cwt."

"Mr. Nearing!"

Miss Kelly had used to smile at him but after a cynical fling of his when she expected flattery, she had retired perplexed. Now, rather hasty and abstracted herself, she appeared, the final annoyance, beside his desk.

"Yes?"

Miss Kelly jerked a thumb. "She wants you."

He said nothing as he rose. Miss Kelly stared uncomfortably after him.

"That fellow's got the pip," said Littlejohn. The ground glass door closed behind Guy.

"Mr. Nearing" — it was almost the first time Hilda had called him by his name. "It has seemed so for some time that we ought to have a talk about your work here."

"It's rotten. Is that what you mean?"

"I — I —" he saw the flush steal under her skin. Hilda had always flushed like that. Guy set his teeth. "I think perhaps you don't realize how really important these routine details are. I — I once did them myself. I —"

"You did them beautifully."

Hilda bit her lip. His eyes, as they glanced past hers, were blazing.

"Everybody must learn. It takes time. But with a little attention — A person who wants to get on —"

"I don't want to get on, Miss Plaisted."

Hilda glanced up and her eyes were dark and pleading. She did not speak at all but he was able to read, almost without knowing that he read, the eyes of Hilda whom he had always known. "I want to help you! Please let me help you! Please let me help you!"

At the sight of those eyes in this place, there flamed up in Guy all the latent bitterness and rebellion. He steadied himself a minute in the rush of anger and then spoke jerkily. "It's rather a joke,

my being here. Was so at the beginning. My education has hardly fitted me — to add up the price of woodscrews all day."

"It needn't — be added up wrong."

It was the first definite criticism Hilda had ever made, but Guy did not stop to think of that. If she had made it before, perhaps he would have said before what he did.

"Certainly not. You can get someone else to do it."

"Oh, Mr. Nearing! I didn't mean —! Please don't misunderstand!"

Yet she had meant it. He knew from her fear.

"This is a good opportunity, Miss Plaisted. I wish to resign."

She said nothing after that, looking at him with the stricken, amazed look of the person mortally injured before he is aware. It was the last time he would have to see her, and Guy thought it was the shock of freedom that turned him so cold. The sunlight was bright on the floor of the room between them, the whirl of the machines came, a distant crooning. Out in the other room the brisk, daily movements were going and shadows passed and re-passed beyond the ground glass door.

"Good-morning."

"Good-morning."

He was out. Falling into his desk chair, Guy felt *almost* light-headed. Somehow, the formalities were

over. Smythe took the news wooden. Excited and wistful, Miss Love and Miss Mahoney dismissed from their lives the most colorful person they had ever seen. The boards of the dusty room creaked at his passage, the desolate, grimy yard stared its jeers. Past the squawking gate, he was in the streets of Cato, blazing and still, in the sunlight of September.

"The ends of the earth! The very ends!" He felt as though he was shouting it breathlessly. He noticed without concern how the few passers by on the deserted streets looked, startled, at his face. "I've tried it! I've done what I could and it can't be done." He was still hot with the reaction, the unbearable horror that had been averted, when Hilda would have dismissed him. "There's nothing the old man can say now. There's no job but this in Cato. The job doesn't want me and I can go. Can go! Can GO!"

He was swinging, at breakneck pace down Maple Street. With a subconscious perception that added to his excitement, he noticed the deserted appearance of the houses at this mid-morning hour. At this time Cato lay under the sunshine like a hive of bees, all closed, with only the faint humming from far within its walls to tell of the steady activity that went on there. A very little child or two played under the windows of a house, a woman, her apron only temporarily flung off, hastened from

one door to another, a dog strolled vacantly or a wagon rolled.

"The — little town!" whispered Guy between his teeth. "The wretched soul-forsaken little mill! This is all. After tomorrow I don't have to see it. Any more."

He took his excitement for joy, there must have been panic in it too. Guy had not considered yet whether leaving the hardware works was defeat.

"Oh, I like your coming in the morning! It's like buying me strawberries in November or any subtle thing that looks cheap but is expensive."

"Supposing I weren't coming any more, Elsie?"
"Guy!"

When a man looks so happy it will not do to let terror creep into the tone. Yet Elsie held her hand suspended over the cigarette she meant to give him.

"Els, it's going to be all different. I'm going out to make my fortune now — or maybe not make my fortune. It seems to me I don't care. But I'm going to see things that are beautiful and people that have time for leisure. I think I'll roam everywhere that it's fun to go and nowhere that people are stupid!" He stopped at the sight of her face.

"Don't you like it here, Guy?"

"Like it! My God, Elsie."

"I didn't know it was so bad." Elsie's voice had some hidden emotion in it.

"Elsie, what do you think I am!" So tense was his feeling that, on looking up, he was dazed to see the old bantering flattery in her face.

"A genius," smiled Elsie.

"I guess not." There was a pause.

"My dear boy, you take it too seriously, don't you think?"

"Do you think so, Elsie?" He raised his head to look at her, in a green and white striped gown, flitting about her cool room. "Do you think you could stand it — I wonder?"

"How worked up you are, Guy."

He stared at her; the words came before he could think. "Could you be the sort of — stoop shouldered clerk — with dirty finger nails — that people order around! And sit in a row with little boys just out of High School and old imbecile failures and girls that you used to smile at a minute on the street and then drop, because they were common stuff that couldn't amuse you. Could you watch all the bosses' talk and the work that's fit for your sort of people to do go on over your head, so far up that you couldn't even reach to touch it! You were sunk — sunk — *among the failures!*"

His tone had been low, and not violent; Elsie had shrunk at it. She shrank more at his contemplative, bitter statement: "You never tried it. *You* never tried it."

"My dear! I'm sorry."

Guy was clutched by revulsion at her words. Elsie was the one person before whom his armor of nonchalance had been complete. In her patient sympathy, his quick senses read disillusion.

"I didn't know you weren't taking it as a joke. You're like your father, Guy."

"It was an amazing interlude, no?" But his flushed face was in his hands: as though the interlude had been exhausting.

"It's over?"

"Oh, quite. I'm thinking about the Near East. Want to come?"

"What do you mean, Guy?"

"I mean I'm insane. They made a mistake at the Works, they diagnosed me as imbecile but it's quite a mistake. I haven't any money, there isn't any at all. And I can't go to the Near East, I have to provide the *Cato Citizen* for my father. But none of these things matter because, you see, I can't stay in Cato. There are no jobs in Cato, I've lost the last one there was, and so I'm going. That's what I said, Els. Do you want to come with me?"

"You really *are* insane."

"Well, that's what you like me for, isn't it? That's what everybody likes me for. Or don't they like me? My father doesn't. Otto Marks doesn't. Smythe at the office doesn't—" His whimsical singsong suddenly stopped.

"I do."

"Nice little Els. That was your cue."

"Guy, if you're going, I want to know it."

"Do you mean you paid attention to what I said? You shouldn't pay attention to me. I meant it."

She stood opposite to him, very serious, and Guy felt an unusual stillness in the room.

"Well, Els! Shall we go to the moon?"

"If you like, Guy."

He crossed quickly to her, and saw burning eyes that looked into his. "I never thought I should care for the moon, boy. I'm rather material. But it's you."

"Why — This makes it all right."

It was an hour later when he left Elsie's porch, with his face again alight. "I'm glad you brought me back, Elisetta. You and I understand if no one in Cato does."

"Don't leave your hat, Guy. You're still a little crazy."

"But we can never come to Cato again. It puts a spell on me. Oh, Els!" His pause was an exhausted one. "I'm — so — glad — it's — over!"

That unflattering slip was not like Guy.

He found the chocolate-colored mansion quiet. Walking up its front steps, Guy felt every board shriek at the morning invasion. The darkened hall was tomblike; from the sitting room, only the faintest rustle told him of his father's presence. A

chill came over Guy; the steps still to be gone through were disillusioning ones — for himself too.

"Something wrong at the Works?"

Mr. Nearing had been sitting apathetically. Guy had grown used, by now, to the emaciation of his hands, the unfocussed, sleeping look of his face. But a new energy seemed to animate him now.

"They're going on as usual. I've left."

"You've —"

Guy took his stand in the doorway. He had no desire to enter this ugly, familiar room. Association with it was over, almost without his volition.

"It's all up, Father. I'm no use there."

"Ye — ye —" the old man's hands were jerking.
"Ye didn't — *want* to stay, Guy?"

A wave of resentment poured over Guy and caused him to rap out. "I did not. And they didn't want me. If I hadn't gone I'd have been fired."

"Fired! My — son!"

Guy found the old man's vapid gaze uncanny. He laughed hurriedly "It was to be expected, I guess. They naturally wouldn't want me."

"That — a'n't true."

Guy was about to answer, but he saw the quivering look of James Nearing's mouth, the glassiness of his gaze.

"I'm sorry — for your sake, Father."

"Oh. Never mind." James Nearing sat back in *silence*.

"I'll go somewhere else, Dad. I'll look around."

The older man still was silent. It was as though the news had turned off some current of life in him, leaving him incapable of any motion, even that of a hand or an eyelid. The sight of him cast a chill over Guy, he was such an inescapable responsibility; his one wish was so unyielding.

"Really, Father, you'll see. I'll find something."

At last James Nearing spoke.

"Guy — I've been meaning to tell you — for quite a spell. Maybe you won't have to stay but a day or two. I don't — feel right. Since you're here, if you would maybe —"

"Shall I get the doctor?"

"I guess so. I didn't think it would turn out to be anything. But if you're going away —"

Half an hour later Guy stood with the doctor beside the patent rocker in the sitting room. James Nearing lay back meekly in it with his eyes closed.

"Why didn't you send for me before?"

"I didn't notice, doctor."

"We'll get him upstairs at once. I'll send you a nurse."

"I'd better not leave town — even for a day — to look for work?"

"You had not. Mr. Nearing's a sick man."

CHAPTER XV

"Oh, I didn't mean to disturb you! I just came in to ask Helga how Mr. Nearing was."

It was Mrs. Fowler, from down the street, passing through the sitting room as one who knew her way. Guy had jumped up from the armchair where Mr. Nearing used to sit. She paused, respectfully, as one does to the Family when there is illness.

"What was his temperature this morning?"

"Oh — I don't believe I know."

Mrs. Fowler puckered her chin. "I wonder if he ate any of Mrs. Sutton's moss jelly. We all thought that would be the thing he could take."

"I — haven't heard."

The neighbor showed surprise, but the Family was not to be questioned. "You've had an anxious time," she said kindly.

"The doctor thinks he may be all right."

"I know. I know. We're all so much relieved. We think a great deal of Mr. Nearing."

"You people are very good to us."

Mrs. Fowler shot a glance of curiosity at her engaging young host. She said solemnly: "There aren't many like your father. He's been an ex-

ample to the whole town. I often tell my boys if they can grow up like Mr. Nearing —!"

It had the effect of silencing Guy. Mrs. Fowler finished, with her small, light-gray eyes wet, "You see — we *know* him. Well, let me know the minute I can do anything."

Guy dropped into his chair again, but there was little use in going back to his train of thought. For a week, now, there had been no room in the house where he could sit without the intrusion of some kindly, capable neighbor. In the first few days, after he had installed the nurse and obeyed the doctor's directions, Guy had had a guilty sense of relief in the silent house. He could use the day as he was accustomed to, come and go in work hours unrebuked. Released from his father's silent observation he might recover his old ease of mind, disturbed by James Nearing and the Works.

He reckoned without Cato. The house was not empty, the neighbors thronged it by right of service. And he could not come and go as he liked, his mission was to wait, breathless, to be of use. The extent to which he could do this measured, to Cato, the extent of his importance. Had he thought to buy the new pillow recommended? No? Then Mrs. Hubbell would provide one. He could not relieve Mr. Nearing's anxiety about Nels Munsen at the Works? Then someone would telephone to Anson. Cato, all the closely-knit, familiar lives, surged

in to support the one that was tottering. And Guy made way humbly for them, with a sense that the enfeebled old man upstairs belonged to them rather than to himself.

In the intervals of springing up to answer the neighbors' questions, he wandered about the rooms downstairs where he seemed present only as a ghost, with no right of possession. These rooms were made for men of another sort than he, he could not feel at home in them. Mrs. Nearing used to soothe and hearten him until the rooms did not matter. Now they stood out stark.

"You're not here for long," the neighbors said, aloof and respectful. And in his heart Guy passionately assented.

It had been disillusioning: more than he thought. He was going now from Cato shorn of the conviction that had always sustained him. He no longer thought that life was all ahead; that the time for the first step in a solid career awaited him. He did not know himself how much the slipping away of this ballast had meant. He had not thought about the past. He had thought only that when his father was well or when his father was — past the need of him: he could go.

Cato people would not understand it. He had lived, already, too many days under their puzzled eyes to expect that. Cato people would find James *Nearing's* son beyond them, but they could scarcely

blame. The little man lying upstairs was a failure. Because his pitiable collapse had clipped another's wings, no one was to blame. Guy would be generous enough for that.

"Has the doctor been in yet this afternoon?"

It was Mrs. Hubbell, Janey's mother, with her little sharp brown eyes and her quick movements, very like a darning needle.

"Not yet. Would you like to wait, perhaps?"

Mrs. Hubbell, who made their clothes, had a chronic respect for the prosperous citizens of Cato. She was standing now, quite meekly, yet a thoroughly positive little person, looking up at the well-dressed stranger.

"You look real worried. I know how you must feel. We all think so much of Mr. Nearing."

"Yes," said Guy gently. "Will you sit down?" He had sometimes a feeling of loneliness outside the little circle that enclosed his father so loyally. It was a feeling near homesickness that made him linger near Mrs. Hubbell, sitting in Mrs. Nearing's chair.

"Godfearing people, your father and mother," said Mrs. Hubbell. Her little sharp face was sweet, as talking of things she cared about. "And Mr. Nearing is a wonderful fine man. I've known him ever since I lived in Cato."

"He has good friends here."

There flitted across Guy's mind at that moment

the realization that there was no place in all the world to which he could turn and draw forth loyalty like that.

"I'm sure it's nice for you to be with your father while he's ill. Of course there's nothing you would care to do in Cato."

Guy unexpectedly wistful admitted: "I haven't found anything."

"You're not the kind for us. You'll be off to foreign parts again."

Mrs. Hubbell rocked in silence. Her little figure in its brown dress, not formless, but stiff and serviceable with a character that spoke of Cato, seemed to fit into that room while Guy ranged about it, an alien. Yet it was a feeling near homesickness that kept him there beside Janey's mother who sat rocking in Mrs. Nearing's chair.

"I found which water tap that was in the cellar that Mr. Nearing was worrying about. I got it turned off."

"You *are* good, Mrs. Hubbell!"

"And you know about the side door? The nurse asked to-day if you locked it at night. He always did."

"I will."

Mrs. Hubbell seemed to have no more to say to him. Guy had a feeling of having slid out of focus. She rocked with gathered brows, putting in *time on household problems*. Guy tried a friendly

approach, strolling to the table where she was examining a faded piece of pottery.

"I expect you never saw one like that before. They dug that up in Peru, which I once visited."

"Oh, yes. Your mother told me you had been there."

She had no interest to ask further: Mrs. Hubbell's world did not include Peru. Guy bit his lip. But the silence which fell upon them left insistent but unexpressed, those things which Mrs. Hubbell *had* interest to ask: "Why did you go to that place and stay so long? What were you doing there that counts? How could you justify it to your mother, waiting for you till she died?"

"I wish I could help, anyhow," said Mrs. Hubbell.

"Thanks. There isn't anything."

He fell upon the next visitor, eyes glittering. "Can't they stay home, Elsie? They're going to wither me through the floor because I don't know — what Dad likes to eat."

"It's getting on your nerves, Guy. Why on earth should you mind?"

"I don't know." The words were said with real astonishment.

"How queer you look." Elsie drew near, a finger caressingly on his sleeve. "You're lonely."

"Lonely as hell."

"Come in the front sitting room and play with me. He doesn't want you, does he?"

"Elsie, he never wants me. I just *sit* here."

"Well, then, just sit *here*." They smiled as he took his place beside her. "We're very well-behaved: even Cato can see. There goes one of them now."

"Elsie — what would you think — if I really hadn't any money? You understand, like — like the man that sells pencils on Main Street."

Elsie was silent for a moment. "You mean," she said in a reasonable tone, "something about Cal-copyrite?"

"Something? Yes. I fear those people were fools. About as big as me." He grinned at her sympathetic face. "They never made sure of their claim and now a lawsuit's on that's going to do them out of it."

"Not actually, Guy?"

"I imagine so." He was extremely weary. "I don't care. Do you?"

"What will you do, Guy?"

"Oh, pick up something." He was angry and Elsie had to wait patiently for the flash to pass. "It would be easy enough — anywhere but here. I have brains."

"Of course you have."

There was silence between them.

"You'd have to start at the beginning somewhere, I suppose."

"*What* do you mean, Els!" He turned on her

so suddenly resentful that Elsie was ashamed of her calculating mood.

"I don't know what I mean. I can't think — where it's about you. Were you crazy the other day, Guy?"

"I wish I need never talk to anybody but you, Els. Till I'm out of here."

"Talk to me."

But after a cajoling five minutes, Guy jumped. "Elsie —!"

"Why, Guy, how absurdly nervous you are."

"Who is that that came down the stairs?"

"Who is that? Lean out of the way. Why, Hil — slinking out the back way. Is anything the matter, Guy?"

"She wouldn't — He must be worse."

Elsie left soon, finding his distraction unapproachable. Guy tiptoed upstairs to the black walnut-furnished bedroom that looked on Nearing Street.

"His condition is very much less satisfactory," admitted the calm nurse at the door. "He asks something about Calco Pyrite."

"Tell him it's — all right."

"I would not give up hope yet, Mr. Nearing. He may rally. But he is very weak."

Downstairs, the house was unwontedly still. It was the supper hour, when each neighbor had returned to her own hearth and gathered her family

about her. The sitting room glowed with evening sunlight on green chairs, brass fender, and flowered carpet. On the mantelpiece, the onyx clock shivered with its ticking; in the rocker, Helga, unable to break the habit of years, had placed the *Evening Citizen*.

In the door of this room where he was only a stranger, Guy paused. The one benign miracle brought by approaching death, which makes possible understanding of those we might have loved, blurred his eyes.

"He doesn't deserve to go this way. I wish Mother were here to comfort — us both."

Before the sunlight finally faded from the sitting room, Guy's thoughts had touched, half consciously, on the only other woman he had ever known who could do that.

"I thought I'd never make ye hear." Helga was in the door, brisk and perfunctory as in everything where Mr. Nearing was not concerned. "Yer supper's ready. And a'n't ye seen the letter I put on the mantelpiece?"

He took it up, dazed, and saw the Calcopryite letter head. "Regret — obliged to inform stockholders — verdict rendered against this company. Machines will be sold on the ground but cannot give hopes of clearing anything for stockholders."

Anything! He had not really visualized it, *though* James Nearing had spoken of this eventu-

ality. The house was mortgaged; there were outstanding debts.

"I'm sorry for the old man. It's not all his fault."

He thought of that in the endless, disturbed night, when the nurse came more than once to give him bulletins. The poor, plodding soul, with a task too big for him, who had begun in humility and ended in failure, had wanted to do well. It was not this end that Guy had looked forward to, or been led to expect all these years. His own wings were clipped, and possibly forever. Mrs. Nearing would have minded that, but he was dulled to it. This meant the end. Now, with a clean slate and no responsibilities he would soon leave Cato forever.

He heard the sycamore creak outside while he thought this, outside his window that looked on the little yellow house. Hilda had not understood, any more than Cato had. They were all trying to drag him to some dull, unlovely idea of reality which was the only thing they knew. He had forgotten his birthright in Cato, — the brilliance that was waiting somewhere.

The next morning he sat in the oak dining room. Children were shouting past on their way to school; a belated father hurried down Nearing Street with his newspaper; women ran bareheaded to the gates calling a last word after husbands and children. All the town was astir at its whole-hearted little round.

"Take this letter if you're going to the corner, Helga. It's to South America."

The nurse stood in the door. "I think you had better come now, Mr. Nearing."

Guy's face looked a question and she nodded. "It may be — the end. He is asking for you."

A deep pity smote Guy at this summons from the bankrupt head of the family to his heir. The great man of the town should have been departing full of years and honors, and summoning his son to hear the secret of his success. And instead, he was slipping away ignominiously, with perhaps some parting word of regret to the son who had never been a companion and who knew him to be a failure.

"Poor old boy!" Guy thought with a rush of feeling. "It's a rotten way to go!"

The nurse placed a chair for him and disappeared through the open door. The chair was a rocker with a little patchwork cushion, the one his mother had used.

"Coming on all right, Father?" Guy tried to be casual.

Very slowly James Nearing turned his white face toward his son. Guy looked at the ravage that had been made with a kind of awe, for it was as though an outer shell of stolidity had been removed and one saw the finer core of James Nearing. He did not speak for a minute: that mere look of his was *enough to answer* Guy's question. The son did not

speak again, the atmosphere of the room was too deadly, too apparent.

"Guy" — the voice was unexpectedly strong, James Nearing's old voice with all its clearness of enunciation. And there was, in the address, the old deliberation and stubbornness. So, Guy remembered, his father talked at the factory when he had something to say:

"Guy — I haven't been a very good father to you."

So! That was all. Guy's face softened at the pathos of this conventional relationship, carried through to the end. The old man took his failure as hard as all that! Then, at least, these last words together were made simple; one could give him a little happiness.

"Indeed you have! Don't feel that way."

There was no change in the face turned toward him. It seemed as if those unwavering eyes were surveying an image of James Nearing's son very familiar to his thoughts, rather than the actuality before him.

"No, I have not."

"Oh, I say, Father —"

"I ought," James Nearing went on, in the quiet, unaccented voice of self-communion, "to have told you before that you were no good."

"That —!"

Guy was sitting three feet away from his father.

It was a physical impossibility for him, at first, to believe that the words had really been spoken by the man on the pillow. That man was looking lucidly at him, yet he must be raving. The meek little toiler, who had always moved on a plane below his wife and son, who had been conscious for so many years of his inadequacy and of his progressive failure, this man had never spoken to Guy in terms other than those of distant courtesy and of apology! Guy had never troubled himself as to what his father thought. It had been in the background of his mind that the older man must look with respect, and possibly with a little envy, at his own more brilliant capabilities. Perhaps it was his mother who had lodged the thought there; she certainly shared it. James Nearing spoke on:

"I thought of telling you sometimes, when I saw how you was going, but your mother wouldn't have it. She expected a lot of you — your mother. I'm not blaming you, Guy" — the voice was quite kindly — "it was pretty much my fault for not telling you."

"You think — I'm no good — now?"

"Why, are you?" James Nearing's voice was still quite calm, as though the situation held nothing new for him. "You're twenty-eight, aren't you? And you ain't never done anything's I know of."

"I —"

"I sort of hoped you could get a start here with

Anson — I didn't expect so much of you as your mother did. I was sorry you couldn't do that. I — was sorry."

"I say! I didn't know —"

James Nearing turned an expressionless regard on his son, as if it were immaterial to him what Guy could have failed to know that would have aided a man of his age to keep an eighteen-dollar job.

"I'm sorry," he said, "for your mother. It seems too bad, her having to put up with the two of us. She was worth better." It was then that the flash of intense feeling passed across his steady blue eyes. "She was a wonderful woman, your mother. It was hard for her to want so much and then have only two failures, like you and me."

"Failures! Two —"

Half of this statement was commonplace to Guy. He had been used to thinking of his mother as tragically tied to a failure. But the other half! James Nearing carried the conversation on alone, after that. It was a confession that he was making, a final atonement, made by that undeviating conscience of his, which had allowed the great passion of his life to divert him, in just one thing, from the uncompromising truth.

"I a'n't any call to blame you, Guy. With me for a father, perhaps you couldn't be expected to be anything much. But I hoped you would — for her. She thought I was going to be a big man, you

see," — again the flash of tenderness — "I tried. That's why the last money went. I suppose you know. But it wa'n't in me. I had persistence; I could work; but I just didn't have the ability." He glanced at his son, quite dispassionately. "You have ability — they tell me, but you haven't any persistence. It comes to the same thing. You'll go off — I suppose — after I'm dead, like you been doing. Well, that's all right. I can't expect you to do any better than I've done. I hope you'll be happy."

There was a great weariness in the man's face. His last duty done, he leaned back and spoke the final words of a self-communion held through many years.

"It a'n't really your fault, I guess. We're a couple of failures. Only I'm sorry — for Her."

James Nearing closed his eyes.

In the deserted rooms downstairs, quiet through all the morning life of the street about them, Guy paced waiting for the end. They resented his presence, those clean, homely rooms, with the tapestried chairs, whose tassels had been lost when he was a child, with the black vases painted with sunflowers, the red table cover embroidered for Mrs. Nearing's betrothal. The house itself, in its four-square simplicity, seemed to cry out against his alien presence, and Guy told it, told himself.

"It isn't true. I can prove to him it isn't true."

Through closed doors he heard the neighbors'

anxious voices arrive and recede. No one disturbed him. From James Nearing's room above there was no sound.

"They'll have to let me talk to him. I can prove to him it isn't true."

The nurse stood in the door: "Mr. Nearing — is gone."

CHAPTER XVI

"I WANT work, Mr. Boyce."

"I wish you did not."

The two men sat facing each other in Boyce's little office almost as they had done six months ago. Boyce, as he had done then, was making rapid checks across a sheet of paper, but his lips were compressed. And Guy had no remnant of the casual mien of that other time. It was the fierce concentration of his manner which was embarrassing the manager and causing the pause before he objected:

"I came — Mr. Nearing — during the time that you were with us — to agree — more or less — with your own estimate. You are not" — Boyce made his concluding check — "fitted for our sort of work."

"Mr. Boyce, I intend to fit myself."

It was a hard moment for Anson Boyce. He had many important matters on his hands that morning and the last item he had expected to add to his troubles was the son of his former employer, looking as though the burdens of the world had descended on his shoulders, breathing grim determination from the chair opposite. The even-handed Boyce felt

that he had sufficient reason for not liking Guy. He could hardly be expected to visualize the devastating days after James Nearing's funeral which had swept clean all the old conceptions, leaving only the frantic desire to regain self-respect by any road. He thought the man looked different and said in some embarrassment:

"I had meant to ask — Mr. Nearing — I understand your father's finances were somewhat involved. I feel a sense of loyalty to him. If a loan would be of any use —"

"I want work."

Boyce's sigh was not evident, but there was a resignation about him as he took up the payroll. "Your old place, of course, is filled."

"I don't want the offices. I've been to the forge shop. They were doubtful, but I want a place. I want to learn this business."

"I don't think I can promise —"

"You don't have to promise. But I wanted you to know."

"They may try you in the forge shop, Mr. Nearing." The manager produced a dutiful smile. "Good-morning."

So, from one day to the next, Guy's world shifted from solid respectability and the glimmering background of adventure, to the smoky, low-ceiled forge shop and a lodging house room. He hardly noticed the change. It is doubtful if he found the shop

dark or the work tiresome. He had, at the moment, attention for only one thing, to silence a voice which spoke from a deserted house on Nearing Street — unanswered.

The mortgage on the house was foreclosed and the furniture sold. James Nearing had taken it for granted that his son would not allow his memory to suffer the ignominy of small debts and the money had gone to pay them. With no one in Cato to care what he did, it had seemed to Guy that there was only one thing he wanted: to start where Jimmy Doane had started ten years ago. There was hardly much exhilaration about it. In the first few days Guy did not see ahead at all. He worked desperately, like a man under water who fights to reach the top, with sensations little different from those of drowning.

Cato saw nothing creditable about it. For Cato, once and for all, the bubble of Guy Nearing, the super-being, had burst, leaving only a drab, unremarkable worker bearing already, because he was older and less carefree than the beginners about him, some of the earmarks of failure. Guy ignored the existence of Cato. It would be hard to say why, when he was earning no less money than he had a few months ago and with a far worthier motive, when he was doing the thing in which he hoped to find salvation, he should have avoided every friend he had with a savage determination. Otto

Marks and Jimmy Mallison, kind of intent and not consciously patronizing, were passed by him with such a fierceness of eye that they searched their consciences for days, mourning tactlessness. Anson Boyce never even glimpsed him.

Elsie Rice sent him two notes and then he came to the bungalow. "Oh, Guy! I didn't realize it had been so bad. What is it?"

She was carried away. Elsie had not meant quite that, for Cato knew that the Nearing fortune was gone; and more than that, the plans for going to the moon had had no sequel.

"Nothing's the matter. I'm just working."

"At the Works?" The commiseration on her face changed, to amazement, to anger. Then expression was wiped out.

"If you like it —"

"I don't like it."

There was a silence. It was as though they had come to ground which they could not tread together. Elsie's eyes flashed invitation which was unheeded, and appeal, quickly veiled, and irritation, almost overmastering. She was no friend to the Puritan spirit of James Nearing which had her playmate in such fierce thrall. Perhaps she guessed its grip, knowing Guy. At any rate, Elsie bit her lip and then smiled very casually.

"Come around some time."

When Guy saw her next, she was in the company

of Horace Liggett, the new rich man who had come to Cato and bought the Nearing house. Elsie smiled inscrutably but Guy, perhaps, found it not inscrutable.

Guy did not come around. Instead, nightly after overtime work, he turned east to the Irish section and put his key in the lock at Mrs. Sterrit's.

Guy had played over this land, half built, when he was a boy, and had thought of it since as the master of the house thinks of certain portions of the attic and cellar where it is hardly his function to go. When, looking for a cheap room, he had found that Mrs. Sterrit offered the only one, he had not quite been able to grasp things. It was not possible that he should acknowledge as his only anchorage on earth this cheap, jerrybuilt house with screaming children on the front steps; its stuffy hall redolent of varnish and matting and the general heat generated by a family of six.

It was not that Mrs. Sterrit's was uncomfortable. Guy, in the course of picturesque wanderings, had slept in many a room to which the present one was a haven of comfort. He had left them light-hearted and without a whit of loss to his self-respect. They constituted adventure; and dignity, though scoffed at, was awaiting him. But the daily living in Mrs. Sterrit's house, which contained the necessary furniture, the necessary plumbing, the necessary heating, to meet the requirements of civilized man,

became a hardship to which freezing and starvation would have been second. It was because everybody took his being there for granted. He was the sort of man to live in this house.

That was what they thought, the Irish carpenter and Swenson of the assembly room who paid Mrs. Sterrit as much rent as Guy. They were people he would not have talked to in the old days, or not with anything but pleasant patronage. But in the winter evenings when the furnace register sent up a damp, discouraging blast and even the study of steel processes grew wearing, he shared experiences with them, grouped on a sagging bed with their pouches of tobacco.

The carpenter had a grievance. He had lost two fingers some years ago and in consequence someone named Peter Dugan had got ahead of him. Swenson had a secret feud with the foreman which kept him monotonously intoning for hours. James Near-
ing would have been aghast to hear these men talk about the Works. It was nothing dear and admirable to them — simply an ugly necessity. They seemed to have no idea of making it otherwise nor any thought of escape. They assumed that the new lodger's attitude was the same.

It was by no means the same. Resigned endurance was the one attitude not possible to Guy. He expected the work to be dull, even found for the present a bitter stimulus in it. But he was aston-

ished to find in these men some of the revolt that had troubled him. Other men tramped up the stairs sometimes of a Saturday night or on the cheerless Sunday mornings when the house smelled of stale coffee and Jake Sterrit pervaded the halls half dressed. Their conversation seemed mostly about grievances, from the basic ones about wages and hours to the most far-fetched conclusions about a foreman's favoritism or wilful obstruction by the management.

It sounded familiar to Guy: It had been his own attitude. He was far from condemning these men, caught in the same treadmill as himself, who grew petty and lost interest in accomplishment. But Guy, for the present, was through with grievances. Just now he saw no road for himself but success over all obstacles, even unjustifiable ones. It was this attitude which procured him a rôle in the forge shop as unexpected to himself as to any one else in the factory.

"This is a rotten place," said the Swede who worked next to Guy.

It was toward the close of a rainy winter's day. In the smoky gloom, surly figures came and went, obscuring and revealing the red points of light from furnace and anvils. Guy did not contradict the statement.

"Look what kind of stuff they give us for make *rakes*. Can't forge her. She busts. Hein?"

Guy had noticed himself the poor quality of the iron. It would, at one time, have constituted only one of the weary incidents of the day. But it happened that he had been looking into the matter of iron on his own account, had even been, a few days before, to the stock room to refresh memories, latent for many years.

"It's a mistake of the stock keeper. All we have to do is explain to Mike and get it fixed."

The Swede lightened. "Huh? Well, you do it. Me, he'll think I'm sore."

After all, some memory of James Nearing's instruction must have lurked in Guy's head, for he was able to show Mike Moran the ill-chosen bars of iron. The men had all been surly about the matter for days.

"Well, that's good, Nearing. If the fellows took a little interest" — Mike was an old foreman and the inrush of new hands and new work had swamped him. It was his custom to consider that workmen weren't any good any more and thus dispose of all forge shop difficulties.

"If I had only one decent workman with sense to explain things to these square-heads!" stormed Mike, "We could now and then find out what's really the matter." That decent workman turned out to be Guy.

He could hardly blame the men for their surliness. Work at the Nearing mill was paid at the rate of

others in the neighborhood, but in spite of its growth the Cato Works tolerated surprisingly primitive conditions.

The forge shop was a wooden shack with two rows of small, grimy windows. Its earthen floor covered with anvils, forges and power hammers most of them of an early type, without safeguards or conveniences. When a good-natured little group of men, friends both of James Nearing and of Mike, had done their pioneering here, the place had been good enough. But the shed had been enlarged and the old machinery taken over, with no added convenience and much less friendliness.

The thirty men who worked there, Germans and Swedes for the most part, had drifted in from a distance and had no loyalty to build on. Mike, the Irishman, was not of necessity a friend of theirs, and Mike was old and arbitrary. Guy, too, had smarted under his full-throated criticisms and, if there had been no driving power to keep him, would have walked out of the shop that day. The other men had also a driving power to keep them — need. It never occurred to them to walk out of the shop, but only to gather in gloomy little knots at noon, glancing darkly around and reiterating expressionlessly that it was a hell of a place. Natural born kickers, James Nearing would have called these men. Anson Boyce would have concluded with *pursed lips*, that they expected a factory manager

to be omnipotent. To Guy, who in other days would have been the least patient of the three, came a glimpse of their basic trouble. They were like himself — they saw no way out.

That human problem kept him thinking, almost as much as the process of knife making, which he had resolved to learn from start to finish. After all, it was men rather than machinery which had always appealed to Guy. There were the usual strike threats being whispered, as there were in most factories. It was hardly the fact that he had once been on the owner's side which kept Guy from joining the whisperers: it was more that he wanted to have made good indubitably as a worker before he protested. The others might already have that right. Not he.

Those were thrilling days for Guy when he first prowled around the Works, watching and investigating, with a problem to solve. It was during these explorations that he came upon Hilda's trail. In the shops, in the stock room, in the yards, wherever he went to find out what was being done and how, Hilda had been there before him. He began to understand into what those silent years of hers, to him a pitiable blank, had gone.

"Oh, yes, Hilder used to be always in the forge shop," Mike told him. "It takes a lot of real seeing before you understand knives. But her and Mr. Nearing! They were the people to go into it!"

"I'll show you our stock room system, if you like. Miss Plaisted organized it."

And, out in the yards the foreman told him: "Yeh, I thought it was kind of funny at first, but I tell you, she's a Man!"

It was meant to refer to character and not to sex: they did not think of Hilda as a man. Her ways were different from theirs, her approach more direct, her understanding more shot with sympathy. She brought some simple, wholesome thing into the drive of work: an untroubled concentration on her task, a serene absorption in making the day fruitful.

Had Guy known all these things, when he sat within a few feet of Hilda? And during the years when communication was cut between them? He thought not, but some foundation there must have been, for the revelation now was so complete, his acceptance of it so absolute. He had not seen her. At rare intervals she passed the door of the forge shop, he caught sight of her head among those of the home-going crowd. As this time, for the first in all their history, he felt an immense distance between them. It was Hilda who had put the distance there, not he. Starting now on the road she had already taken, he had his first sober understanding of what the actual use of years must mean.

At first he had been horribly afraid she would appear, that he must look up at any minute, *schooled* to meet her eyes. But Hilda, as well as

he, seemed to feel the need of separation. It was as though some chapter had ended in their relations and each needed to breathe alone for a little while. Hilda was perhaps glad to be free, on whatever terms, of trying to help him. When he was sure that he need not dread Hilda's bodily presence, he began to think of her.

He was not sure she would understand the problem that absorbed him now. Hilda could not have seen the men at Mrs. Sterrit's and the forge shop as Guy could. She, by a divine accident of sanity, had never known frustration. But, keeping in mind the simplicity of her attitude, which generated productivity as the sun does heat, he made efforts towards adjustment in the forge shop which would hardly have occurred to him on first impulse.

"Look a' the wash basins they give us," said the blacksmith's helper washing up beside him. "Like coal bins."

"We don't have to leave 'em that way."

"Aw, you must be workin' for the management."

It may have been then that the idea occurred to Guy that it was possible for a man to work for the management, presenting the requirements of these neglected human machines in no invidious sense. He offered next day:

"Mike, if I tell you exactly how much it would cost to get more wash basins and get the men to keep them clean, will you put it up to the boss?"

"Aw, what do ye take me for?"

"It's not impossible. I think we'd gain from it."

"The devil take trouble makers," said Mike.

The days passed and the wash basins remained as they had been. It was one little grievance among many, but a justified one. Guy, with the figures made out, pondered. If he could go to Boyce with this, his first complaint, there would probably be but one answer—discharge. And no other man would go. He was sorry to leave a grievance of men who had more rights than he, unredressed; already they were looking to him for guidance. But when next he went to Anson Boyce more must be talked about than wash basins.

He had been thinking fast these few days and the plan for which he had been searching was ready. James Nearing and Mrs. Nearing would not have understood this zeal of their son for the human side of the factory, a side which to them had hardly existed. But Guy, coming fresh to the work from a very different scheme of life, was possessed by a vision of the waste and inefficiency being practised on the human machine. Others might deny that maladjustment and discontent should interfere with a man's work. Guy did not. He knew that even the union, making its natural claim for less of the disagreeable work and more reward for it, had not seen everything. Men do not want to be idle, they *want to create*.

Guy saw ahead of him years of work. He did not know to what his study of shop conditions, placing of men, arbitration of grievances, would lead. But he was determined to acquire the knowledge and the standing which would convince Anson Boyce that he was the man to remake these things.

"It'd be just like Hilder to put yer little wash-bowls over wid de big boss. And maybe some of them other contraptions too."

It was Saturday afternoon and the forge shop was empty save for Guy and the foreman. It was only the informal discipline which was a legacy of James Nearing and the indulgence, without admiration, accorded to Guy, which permitted him to be there, bending over a vise.

"You told — Miss Plaisted?"

"Yeh. Hilder was down here last night askin' how things was comin' on. Used to be around here most all the time but I don't know what's struck her lately."

There was silence from the bench by the grimy window where Guy was working.

"I told her you give me the figgers. Didn't expect you to be here this afternoon."

"Why?"

"Well, she wanted to see how it would look by daylight."

"Good heavens, Mike!" The hoe blade in Guy's hands went clattering down. But it was at that

moment that the purchasing agent opened the door. "Oh, did you wait, Mike?"

She had not expected to see him. Guy saw a quiver go through her while she made her readjustment.

"Nearing worked it out. If ye want, he'll tell ye about it, but believe me they'll soon be as dirty as the others."

"Oh. Will you then — Mr. Nearing?"

He rose and came over to her. It was a rainy winter afternoon and the place looked dark, with all the lights turned out but one. Guy was of a piece with the dreary griminess of the place: she had caught him at work, with no time to remove the ragged overalls or the smears of black on face and hands.

"I'll go, will I, Hilder? The kids'll be waitin'."

"Oh! Yes, Mike. You mustn't stay overtime."

Then the two faced each other. They looked poles apart, Hilda, in her trim cleanness, with the air of command which instinctively clung to her inside these walls; and a nondescript greasy workman, slouching up from his machine.

"Your idea is so good. I wanted to help."

He did not answer. Just at that moment Guy was not thinking of washbowls. He was thinking of the Hilda whom he had learned to know only in the last months, the most drastic of their separations. She knew then that her dignified pretense

would not stand and she looked up piteously, earnest eyes asking if she had again offended instead of helping.

"Hilda!"

"Guy!"

And then she quivered a little, alive to the very depths.

"I have something to say. It can't wait."

Then she knew, too, what was coming. The words for which she had waited so many years, the words for which she was now unprepared. He saw the look of fright suddenly controlled, he saw Hilda, tall and calm among the rusty forges and power hammers, put out a hand as if she would like to sink to the floor and cry. But how could he offer to hold her? He only hurried, so that she should soon know what he had to tell her.

"I talked to you four years ago as the self-centered fool that I was and I don't know how it may have defaced your ideas of love, or of me. I think it was sacrilegious. I can't see any possibility of asking you to forgive me, but I can't go on without speaking. I've thought about it — for four years."

Hilda's eyes had filled with tears; it was a hard thing to listen to those words. She leaned against a column, trembling a little, even while she did not take her eyes from Guy's.

"I understood, Guy."

"Hilda!"

"Not at first. It took me a long time. I — I know, too, what it is to be without self-respect."

"Oh!" It was a cry.

"But after a while I did understand. What you did was bad, but you were not bad."

"Is that what you thought?"

It was the particular moment after she said that which seemed to Guy the only real, stupendous one he had ever known.

"That was the truth. I knew you."

"But Hilda, I thought — you felt the sort of scorn — that would keep us apart forever. That's why —" his hand waved toward the place about them, the straining of the last months together rose up in all its hopelessness.

"How could I scorn — you?"

Hilda raised her eyes to Guy's face. Her expression was very grave. She made no effort to change it, nor to conceal. In the obscurity of the falling winter twilight, he could still see the clear depth of the eyes that said the thing which Hilda lived by.

"Hilda!" He waited, it seemed unbelievable to say. "You cared!"

The deserted mill left them very much alone in its shadows. The cold rain had begun to beat against the windows; the watchman's echoing step passed the door again and again. She had walked straight to him, her arms held out; the top of her brown head came just below his eyes. It was after

he had held her a minute that he said, reverent, appealing:

"Hilda — may I kiss you?"

Then they stood apart, his hands holding hers, while he looked at her. "You understand, Hilda, that I love you? That I have done it for years, and didn't know? That you're behind my thoughts all the time, the thing that makes light?"

"It's — that way I feel toward you."

"My God, Hilda!" He dropped her hands and backed away. "Let me look at you! How can you! People — don't have generosity like that. There isn't any more I can say."

"Guy," said Hilda. She had always had an elemental shyness about the words of passion. He saw now all her reluctance to hearing him any further in confession, or self-reproaches; the eyes pleaded for silence. So while he offered it to her they waited, listening to the rain that shut them in, in a new place which stood for their future.

"Guy — there isn't any more we need say. I am making enough for us both. Let us be married now."

He did not move from his place, away from her, among the greasy machines and the crowded benches. He saw the deep fear of a girl who has stepped beyond the boundaries that constitute her life, in Hilda's eyes. Hilda was a girl. Guy saw the single-hearted desire and the fear, and the

shadows in her face left by unending patience. He saw Hilda's hands that hung by her sides so very still, waiting before they would clasp his again. His voice was scarcely audible.

"No, Hilda."

She moistened her lips, and that was all.

Guy waited to get control of his words. The place seemed so cold that the world might have ended, leaving them to wither there.

"I don't know if that will hurt you much. I can't help it. I should have thought of that before. How can I marry you?"

"How — can you marry me?"

He came very near without touching her, a disheveled figure with the sordidness of the shop about him. "*You must see!* I'm sorry to hurt you. I'm so sorry I don't know how to go on. But Hilda — my darling — what do you take me for? *I can't marry you — now!*"

She did not answer him at all, trying to understand, trying to force the understanding of his man's point of view into her unhappy eyes. "It's not that I — have — a better position?"

"Oh, partly that. Though perhaps if I were man size, too, it wouldn't matter. But — I'm not. I haven't made good. You're a man and I'm not."

"Must it matter?"

He straightened up furiously. "Yes, by God, it *must!* Hilda, I swear to you that if I married you

now I could never look a human being in the face again. Rotten! Worthless! Fired! Working for fifteen dollars a week! And I allow myself to be picked up and carried along by the chief of a department because somebody's always done that for me and I can't stand alone? Oh, Hilda!" His voice was really agonizing.

Hilda's eyes were filled with tears.

"Oh there! I didn't mean to beg you to let me off out of pity. I just mean to tell you that I can't do it, dear. That's all. I can't do it." There was finality in his tone.

The tears were undried, but she stretched out her hand quietly.

Guy's eyes were deeply alight. The thing that had shattered Hilda had given an irresistible impetus to him.

"Sweetheart! I swear it won't be long! Can you wait?"

It was not until long afterward, when Guy thought of this word echoing, with all the words that had passed between Hilda and himself, through all his working hours, that he realized how it must have fallen upon Hilda. But she made no motion of despair, only after a moment with her head turned away, turned back to him.

"As you want, Guy."

They were both shaking, the chief of department and the factory hand, seen by the watchman as he

paused inquiring in the door. And as Miss Plaisted turned to go, the workman in flannel shirt and misfit overalls laughed unsteadily, looking into her eyes.

"I'm going to fix up this forge shop. Now."

CHAPTER XVII

GUY put his key in the lock at Mrs. Sterrit's. Inside the stuffy hall the children's coats hung in a row, Jake Sterrit's lunch box stood on the little oak table beside the baby's bonnet, up the stairs the smell of heat and varnish greeted him. Inside the bedroom there sprang into view the sagging bed, the scratched bureau and his own suitcase, planted by the wall in sign of transiency. Under the shrieking gas, they leaped out in all their mediocrity, their deadly usualness reminded him, as they had on every night for the six months since James Nearing's death: "We're here! We're here! This is where you live!"

Guy scarcely saw them. He flung his hat in a corner and dived for some sheets of calculations, left unfinished the night before. He tipped the scratched oak chair against the bed beneath the gas-light and became absorbed.

Guy had been that day for a conference with Anson Boyce, the first since the one, almost six months ago, when the manager had given ungracious permission for him to try the forge shop. Guy had had to confess to a feeling of trepidation before

it, the other had such good reason to distrust him and he found himself, with a man of such opposite temperament, at his very worst. The first sentences, in fact, had not been propitious.

"Nearing, what does Mike tell me about your stirring up trouble in the forge shop?"

The manager swung around in his swivel chair. He gave always, in Guy's eyes, the effect of unnecessary emphasis of his superiority. There would have been an explosion in other days. Now there was a short silence.

"There are certain things that ought to be done at the forge shop, Mr. Boyce, if you want the men to work there without trouble. Shall I explain them?"

"Explain, if you like."

It was as little receptive an audience as any man could hope to have. Undoubtedly, Guy was the last advocate that the forge shop should have selected for its grievances. Yet it had no other.

"You are having unnecessary accidents, and unnecessary slowness because the men are dissatisfied. They haven't yet thought of striking—"

Boyce looked up quickly.

"But they are already organized in unions and they will strike unless the shop equipment is brought up to date, and they're treated with as real efficiency as possible."

"Efficiency synonymous with pay?"

"Pay too. Don't you think morale depends on more than money?"

It may not be obvious, but that answer was a triumph for Guy. He had thought of knocking Boyce from his chair.

"So you think the forge should be completely refitted. And how can I know what other demands I won't find on my back when I've consented to that?"

"I don't see how you can know. You don't work in the forge shop. It seems to me you'll have to have a committee of men from there and talk things over. Let them help decide shop policies."

"Nearing, do you intend to make us trouble?"

The declaration of attitude was made: Boyce was as nearly angry as Guy or any one had ever seen him. Nor was Guy unstirred. He thought of pointed insults that would have done his heart good. Then his lips curved in an unresisted grin that had every right to cause the other man anger. Guy had thought of the only good joke for six months. "What would Hilda do?"

"I mean, Mr. Boyce, to say that production depends on workers as well as on machines. That you've got to give some real consideration to their treatment whether you're asked to or not. And I think I have as much capacity to see that as any man."

Boyce's pencil came out. He made checks, large

and very angular all the way across the paper before he permitted himself to speak.

"You may have some justification. But I am not prepared for the present, to listen to any extraneous suggestions that you may make. If you want a job in the forge shop, stay on it."

His gaze almost swept Guy bodily to the door. Any Swede in the forge shop would have gone, leaving workmen's representation to brew for another year. James Nearing's son stood still, and said:

"You'll have to see presently, Mr. Boyce. It's a question that can't be dropped."

Before the interview ended, Boyce saw. On painstaking proof of the number of accidents, the time spent by different workers on their operations, the reasons for delay, he granted that his workers were complicated machines, not working well. Boyce, who beside James Nearing had been young, was, beside Guy, one of the old school. He had no patience with the man who could not rise as he had risen, by persistence undeviating and sometimes hard. It was only at the last ditch that he gave in, some ultimate antagonism to James Nearing's son giving strength to his disbelief.

And now Guy was at home, properly commissioned to go ahead and do, for pay, the thing that had occupied his spare hours. Boyce had not been lavish, his virtue was justice rather than generosity.

But he was willing to make the most obvious improvements suggested by a committee of the men. He was willing to order an expert study of the shop, what it lost by uncomfortable conditions; he was willing to give Guy a trial in some very embryo position leading to that of personnel manager.

Guy tipped down the chair, ultimately, when the calculations were finished and stared absently around the room. His eyes lit on the suitcase and almost unconsciously he picked it up and slung it inside the closet. Closing the door, he seemed to glance around for the first time at the marble-topped table, the pink wall paper and the sooty shade.

"We're here," they challenged. "We're here! This is where you live!" Guy cocked an eyebrow at some memory, just evoked. "I don't care where I live," the passing Swenson heard him remark aloud. "I'm busy." The rest of the soliloquy Swenson did not understand so well for he called out laboriously, "What do you mean, 'Hill'? There ain't nobody by the name of Hill in this house."

The next months were full ones. The forge shop was partly rebuilt, the windows were cleaned and new ones put in, the ventilation improved, and a forge blowing system installed; safety devices appeared, likewise special baths for tempering, and chemical testing facilities. The work at the forge shop became unbelievably easier and cleaner. Mike

would not have liked it, but Mike had retired after an attack of bronchitis, caught in the draughty old shop; Jimmy Doane, once of the stock room and now returned from Pittsburgh, was now in charge. Jimmy admitted, as did Boyce, in the end, that the work went so much easier and quicker that it was only right for the men to get more pay.

Guy was by this time a member of the blacksmiths' helpers' union, organized sometime since in the Cutlery Works, but even the union seemed not to solve all problems. He began to hark back to a scheme jumped at many months ago, when Guy had a habit of jumping at things and abandoning them. Why not representation for the workers when some of the bigger problems are decided? Some share in the responsibility that makes work worth while?

It was not an idea to propagate unconsidered, and Guy, testing its significance, questioned Jimmy Doane.

"They's strikes everywhere else, I suppose ye know," Jimmy had been complaining.

"What do the men want?"

"Pay."

"We've just secured a raise."

"Then more pay."

"Is that what you want, Jimmy?"

Jimmy, since Guy was now quite his equal, became cautious.

"And it's nothin' at all they ought to have, bad 'cess to 'em. Lazy devils every one, and I'd fire them if I had my way."

Smythe was no more illuminating. "What can you expect?" said Smythe blandly. "Our work is not very important. I think we are very well treated."

Smythe was a relic of the old times. He spoke as James Nearing would have done. There had been no feelings of oblivion in James Nearing's day. He had puttered around the forge shop on terms of friendly equality with Mike Moran and his dozen workers. They had belonged to the same church; when their wives were ill Mrs. Nearing went to see them, half friend, half feudal lady.

Anson had changed that. It was under him that the factory had expanded and he was the leader of its systematization and growth. Boyce was not friendly with the men, he had no time. In spite of his justice, people admitted in the manager a strain of hardness. The old democracy evaporated while he paid no heed. Encased in his office, he kept the machine rigidly at work and the murmurs which sounded menacing in Guy's ears were, to him, the negligible bickerings of the unfit.

"I don't mind your conferring with them. You seem not to have done any harm."

That was the most he would concede to his new personnel manager. And he did not know for how

much comradely adjustment of little difficulties he was indebted to the man who "was not fit for the factory."

It was Hilda's little domain which was untouched by the general shadow. Hilda had never dealt in superiority and inferiority. James Nearing's democratic spirit lived unblighted in her office. In view of that lustily flourishing organism, organization seemed absurd. So Guy approached Hilda in the home-going crowd.

He did this seldom. It is somewhat difficult to know on what footing to see a woman whom you have refused to marry and whose usual place is in an office, surrounded by inquisitive subordinates. It was a thing known to Guy and very mysterious to Hilda that, the less he kissed her, the straighter work would go.

It was a May afternoon and there were reasons enough for their being together, but their acknowledgment of it was only a quick flash of the eyes.

Miss Mahoney and the girl from the advertising room were just behind them. The home-going parade was not censorious of office talk, only of personalities, so he said directly:

"About shop organization. You know we've been trying to see how we can arrange a square deal for our men without bankrupting the shop. I can't see but one way, Hilda. Hand over some responsibility."

"What would they want of it?"

"Well, Hil, I know how I felt. Ignored, stepped on, no way of being heard except biting off my nose to spite my face — which is getting fired."

"Oh, Guy!"

"I hated all bosses and everybody ahead of me."

"It isn't that way in my office."

"Maybe not in yours. You're rather perfect."

"But I've never found it that way since I've been working. When your father brought me here the Works was like home and we were all friends. Do you know, I believe he found it that way too. I always thought that Mr. Nearing, here, was like a man in his own house."

"Perhaps." Guy, walking silently by her side, had a fleeting glimpse of James Nearing in the chocolate colored mansion, subdued and wistful, not at home. The ray of light on a person he had never really known, struck him with pathos. Yet he insisted.

"But there's really something there, Hil. All that's melted away without our knowing it. And workers miss it. Don't you see people are human?"

They were alone now, by a lilac bush that shadowed the corner of Hilda's street. She had turned away at that last plea of his and when she turned back he saw tears in her eyes.

"I see."

"My darling!"

"Oh, Guy, it was you who weren't going to!"

"Hil, you're not going to wait. You understand. I'll make good before you've had time to think about it much oftener."

"It's all right, Guy."

After that she tried to help him, not understanding, acknowledging with surprise the seamy side of work which he, and not she, was now strangely fitted to interpret.

And when he did not see her, because the press of work was too great, Guy could always have the company of a picture of Hilda evoked from memory.

He had so many of them, he who had spent his childhood beside her. Hilda in a pink and white checked dress, playing marbles opposite him. Hilda with a long brown braid over her shoulder, swinging home from school; Hilda on the top step of the porch, doing algebra of a spring evening; Hilda in a canoe —!

Looking them over, one by one, in the minutes which caused no interference with work, a remarkable thing happened. Guy began to know Hilda. It astounded him to see how violently he would have gathered her to him without understanding. Now, through night after night, and day after day, he put together the disregarded memories. Hilda would be happy some day because of this. To be known as well as loved, is a thing hoped by few

women. Strangely enough, it was in these moments, rather than in any of the years that had gone before, that Guy wondered how Hilda could really care. Catching glimpses of her, unconscious, at the work that was so much a part of her, seeing her with Boyce, two competent, well-matched figures, sharing their views like equals, he wondered, and was gripped by a terrible urge to haste. Perhaps there was an end, even to Hilda's power of waiting.

One spring day, more than a year after that interview in the forge shop, Guy had been walking by the riverbank. It was sometimes a perilous place to walk because of memories evoked, but on this Sunday he felt he had a right to it. There was to be an interview with Boyce the next week in which the plan for workmen's representation would be finally presented. Much depended on that plan. It was true Guy felt that it was the only way to keep the factory on solid ground amid a threatening flood of labor troubles. But there was more than that.

Guy's position was still an anomalous one, growing in importance, but not quite acknowledged either in salary or prestige. This new plan would mean a complete reorganization of the factory. The personnel manager would become not only a permanent figure, but one of the most important ones. Obsessions about superiority and inferiority sink away from a man who is engrossed in work. Guy

was no longer burdened with the idea that he must be Hilda's equal in position before he could marry her. Yet he was indulging, this afternoon by the riverbank, a certain boyish anticipation. Next week, when he went to Hilda, it would be to offer her, in the eyes of Cato, as much as she offered him. The air, today, was alive with the shouting of young voices, the couples were paddling home in the early cool of the May afternoon. Beyond him, at the turn, he saw the brown eddies of the quick water and further, through the yellow leaves of the birches, the still stretch where a canoe could be moored at the bank, where one *had* been moored, many years ago while the cows lowed and the bell tolled for prayer meeting.

"Why, Guy Nearing! You? In such a place?"

He had approached the boathouse where the couples were already disembarking. On the float, in an orchid colored dress, Elsie Bauerman unfurled her parasol, with Horace behind her.

"Run away and play, Horace. Guy'll see me part way home. Or shall we go home?" she asked when Liggett had turned slowly away, with his observing smile. "Can't we push off this canoe and slip away around the curve? I haven't seen you for a long time, Guy."

"Elsie, I — I can't."

"Business?"

He did not answer her. Elsie, with a hand on his

arm, drew him slowly along the path under the birches. "How is the moon, Guy?"

"Elsie, how are *you*?"

"I'm going to marry Horace, I think." There was a little silence. "But maybe I won't. Today's a holiday. Let's nobody get married today. What did you say about the moon?"

"Do you think I can fly?"

"I don't know." His words had been sober and she turned on him with the full, intimate glance of years ago. "Come this way. You smell of cutlery." And under the tree shadows she turned to him with a spark in her eyes. "It's a rather nice Sunday. And that river makes a little secret gurgle when Horace lets you sit still to listen and I can't remember whether I was ever seventeen or not. Can you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, you can fly, Guy! I saw it."

He put his head down to kiss her hand. "I'm sorry."

Elsie's fingers, removed, left a greater feeling of intimacy than if they had been in his.

"Maybe you *will* be sorry — for turning yourself into an Anson Boyce. You like it, do you? It wasn't Anson Boyce I asked to fly."

"I didn't turn myself. I was."

They had learned to say too much during silences. This one was clamorous.

"Don't come back some other time. It's now I want to fly."

"Good-by, then."

"Good-by."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE May air was warm as Hilda left the factory. Up and down the streets of Cato the mothers were wheeling their baby carriages. On the lawns where the pansies were already set in their circular beds, children skipped rope and played tag. The new leaves still left the skeletons of the maples visible: the tall, dappled forms of the sycamores stretched half-clad boughs against a blue sky.

Hilda, walking slowly toward the dapper part of the town where the Plaisted bungalow lay, succumbed to a sort of lassitude. It seemed so very often — she had traversed that same way, to work in the morning, from work at night. There was a time when it had not been monotonous, but that was in the very early days when, with all the enthusiasm of undriven youth, she had kept house in the stock room. She had been a working woman a long time now.

Out of caprice she turned down a street she did not usually follow, and was hailed from a bungalow porch.

"Oh Hilda! You look awfully trig and business-like! Why so purposeful?"

"Going home, Elsie."

"What's the hurry? Come up here and chat a minute. Would you have fresh tea?"

"How dainty you look yourself! You can wear slippers all day, can't you?"

Elsie laughed, stretched in her long porch chair beside a deserted tea table. "To walk from the porch to the sitting room. Tell me, Hilda, is work nice?"

Hilda had taken her place opposite, her straight figure in dark blue serge a strong contrast to Elsie's beruffled slimness. The contrast between the two had always been notable. And because of that there were scarcely two women in Cato who saw each other less or understood each other more intimately.

"Work is satisfying." Hilda leaned back while the late sunlight struck her gold brown hair, over which she ran a weary hand.

"Ah, is it now?" Elsie was watching the other. "Yes; take off your hat. I wish I were your type—gaining distinction as you grow older."

"Oh, Elsie! But I was stodgy."

Both were lapsing into the inevitable, if unwilling, intimacy of those who have known each other from childhood.

"It may come out the same in the end," mused Elsie, taking count, in the sunlight, of every contour of the other woman's face, every line of her figure. "Twelve years, isn't it, Hil? Assets: for

me, a husband; for you, an independent position. And now we're starting out even."

"Starting even?"

Elsie leaned back, watching the robin on her infinitesimal lawn. "For settling down as a married woman in middle life, I don't know but your record is as good a basis as mine."

"Oh, Elsie, do you think you're romancing in the schoolhouse orchard at recess?"

"That wasn't romancing." Elsie smiled reminiscently. "That was planning."

Hilda was silent. No use for her to pretend before this woman, of all others, that she had planned, in the schoolhouse orchard, anything but matrimony. The rest of Cato might know Hilda as an independent woman against whom no whisper of such a thing was ever breathed. Not the girl who had once wanted the same man. They did not mention the man, however. No matter what subjects were laid bare between those two, none of them was ever Guy Nearing. Elsie said, twitching her slipper:

"I'm marrying Horace Liggett."

"I'm very glad, Elsie. You'll be happy."

"As for that — one's had one's first fling at it. Horace is my sort." She looked up with an amused, meaningful glance at Hilda. "At that he's not such a good catch as Mr. Boyce. Joke on me."

It had been assumed for many years that to call

it a joke for any man to like Hilda was no insult. Hilda responded calmly:

"I relinquish the credit."

"Is that so?" Mrs. Bauerman looked more closely at her companion. The one quality never attributed to Hilda was inscrutability. Yet there was no tightening of the lips nor gleam of the eye to show that she secretly gloated over Anson Boyce.

"You'd better accept, Hilda. It's a good solution." Elsie regarded her with narrowed lids. "You're coming out a length ahead and I congratulate you. We've both borne up pretty well — considering."

That last word of Elsie's was the only telltale one. She lowered her eyes quickly, nor did Hilda look at them. No need for that between these two.

"I'm almost jealous of you," said Elsie. "You must have had a good deal of fun, arriving where you are. Bauerman wasn't fun. Wish I'd known. How could you tell — at seventeen — that work would be satisfying?"

"I couldn't, Elsie." They were silent.

"Why, look at Hilda, leaving figures for half an hour to play with the most popular lady in town! Has the office burned up, Hil?"

It was Janey Marks, with her inevitable baby carriage, looking ten years older and many degrees jollier than the other two.

"Don't be sarcastic, Janey; I want to hold Peggy Ann."

Janey watched the process with the friendly aplomb of a mother of four. 'She does pretty well for an old maid, doesn't she, Elsie?'

"Old maids," said Elsie, with a rueful glance at Hilda, "are the only people who stay young."

"Talking about staying young," said Janey, throwing a blanket at Peggy Ann as she relinquished her to Hilda's tender mercies, "did you ever see anybody change like Guy Nearing?"

"Oh," said Elsie, "is he still in town?"

"Why, gracious! They say he's got a job at the Works. Has he, Hil?"

Hilda nodded, playing with the baby's hair. Elsie, with an appraising eye on them, remarked, "Did you ever see such a sky-rocket?"

"Oh Elsie, it isn't all Guy's fault. Janey had a motherly charity. "He was brought up wrong."

"Too much Mr. Nearing, *I* say." Elsie was sharp.

Janey, shocked, refused to take the other side of the argument. "Well, I think it's too bad. A boy that started out so well as that just sinking out of sight. I should think for his own sake he'd want to accomplish something. Let Cato see he wasn't a fizzle."

"There's Otto, Janey." It was Elsie who said this, having glanced once more at Hilda.

"Oh, my goodness! Is it as late as that? Give me the baby, Hil; I have croquettes to fry."

Janey manoeuvred the baby carriage with expert

speed down Elsie's walk in pursuit of a bulky figure across the street.

"Ot! Did you stop for the cucumbers?"

Hilda and Elsie faced each other for a minute in the spring twilight. "I would have changed with you," said Elsie.

Hilda walked home alone in the deepening twilight. She was obliged to admit to lax hours like this one, sometimes. It was two years now since her talk with Guy in the forge shop. The years did not show, the office said, save in an added gentleness. They wondered what kept Miss Plaisted young. Sometimes Hilda wondered if it were all a privilege to stay so young, so unfulfilled as she. In a way, life had ceased to move for her since that visit to the forge shop.

There had been, after that, one vital interview of which she treasured the memory, mysterious yet palpitating. It was some months after the visit to the forge shop, when he and she stood together in the thawing woods and he held her close.

"We can't do this often, Hil."

"Not even —"

"Why — dear, I didn't think there was anything in the world I knew more about than you do, but there seems to be something. I mean — when I kiss you I don't want to wait."

"Do I?"

"Oh, darling, you're not going to; I swear you're *not*."

She was disturbed by his look, though not understanding. She realized that the thought of her, in those early tense weeks, was almost an obstacle. Yet she was happy, with a benignant calm, new and miraculous. She watched Guy advance step by step, and grew almost frightened to see how fast he was coming to her. Then, though she understood, she had to steel herself to the inevitable phenomenon of a man so absorbed in work that not even love can distress him.

He came to her desk, in formal office fashion to tell of his projects one by one. They were quaint little interviews, vivified only by a glance or two, the intensity with which he waited for her approbation, her ardor at each success. They signalled each other in the home-going crowd — on her side the look of solicitude, on his the quizzical raised eyebrow: "Not yet but soon." Hilda was proud of Guy. She was sure, not only because she loved him, that he had found the real work. She watched his advance along a road which she herself might never have explored, with humility as well as joy.

But now and then Hilda was lonely. Such a time was this spring night after a day when the factory had been all agog with renewed talk about labor troubles and with a scheme put forward by the personnel manager to take care of them. She had not seen Guy for a week. He had been closeted with this man and that, laborers and department

heads. She knew they were all converted to the scheme he had first conceived years ago and shared with her at each of its amplifications. But tonight Hilda did not care about representative councils for workmen and employers, even though it might mean life or death to the factory. She remembered she had once cared and once taught Guy to care. Tonight she was thinking of the plans in the school-house orchard.

"Dorrie's gone on the river with Herb Littlejohn, Hilda. I thought I'd set your supper on the porch." Mrs. Plaisted in her black and white spotted dress was waiting under the honeysuckle. She and Mr. Plaisted and Hilda formed the family now, with Dorrie to exercise the privilege of youngest. Hilda sat down at the little straw table while Mrs. Plaisted rocked beside her with the *Christian Herald*.

"Mother —" this was after a silence, when Hilda had put aside her plate, and the twilight had grown too deep for faces to be clearly seen. "Mother, you don't feel you need me at home, do you?"

"Why, why —" the paper was laid down — "what's the matter, Hilda?"

"Nothing, dear. I was just thinking — we're all very comfortable now, and Dorrie — I don't think nineteen is too young to marry."

"I want Dorrie to be happy," admitted her mother as though it were an assent. "Have you got something to tell me, Hildare?"

Hilda reached out a hand to the older woman's. They looked very quiet and well poised, these two tall figures, sitting at the door of the house they had furnished and cared for together.

"I've been a pretty easy daughter, haven't I? I've never had anything to tell."

Mrs. Plaisted rocked, quietly clasping the hand. "I came to your door a good many times the night you cried all night — when you came home from the picnic with the salad bowl."

"That was long ago, Mother."

"I've always wanted you to be happy, Hilda."

The meaning Mrs. Plaisted gave to this phrase brought a silence between them. Mrs. Plaisted broke it suddenly:

"That reminds me. Anson Boyce telephoned. Wanted to know if he could talk over something with you tonight, but I wasn't sure —. He said anyway he'd see you in the morning."

Mrs. Plaisted spoke with the respect accorded by all the family to Anson Boyce's messages. Hilda smiled a little wearily. She had gained much respect in Cato because of the admiration of a man she could not satisfy.

The next day Hilda and Anson sat in the manager's office. The years, which in the purchasing agent showed in a greater gentleness, showed in the manager sternly. Anson Boyce had been the sort of man never really young. The hardness about

him that made his face just, yet never joyous, made it more sober and office-worn. It lightened at moments like these, with Hilda. There was an atmosphere between these two of confident friendship that kept office life healthy for both of them. They spoke the truth together because they counted it worth while.

Anson now pushed away his papers and began to make checks while Hilda, versed in this notation, smilingly noted their size and frequency as symptoms of how determined Anson was.

"As to this plan of representative councils — I am obliged to admit that it seems not illogical. It is drastic. I decline to think the labor situation so serious as Nearing says. He has, I admit, shown surprising ability in dealing with the men."

"They say it was only he who averted a strike when we had all that trouble last year."

"Yes. He had done — creditably."

"Then why not trust him this time?"

Boyce's eyes rested on the purchasing agent with some inquiry. "Do you happen to know him well at all?"

"We were — childhood friends."

"Oh, that." The manager again returned to his paper, with pursed lips. "I grant the special feeling of obligation we both have — toward the memory of Mr. James Nearing. Of course his son — well —"

"If he should put this through, it would be the

biggest accomplishment of any factory in this part of the country!"

"That is true. He has a good deal of resourcefulness" — check — "knowledge of people —"

"Reliability."

The manager's pencil, poised, came down violently. "No, Hilda. I am sorry for being too conservative, but this is a big thing. It won't hurt young Nearing to wait. I cannot trust him with this plan at present."

The purchasing agent considered him. There was no doubt about his determination, his real feeling.

"I differ with you, Anson."

"I'm sorry, Hilda." They regarded each other somewhat ruefully. "I'm glad it isn't a personal matter, Hilda. If you made it that —"

"I don't, Anson. You must follow your best judgment."

She sighed. The noon whistle had blown; out of the gate the swarming heads were bobbing. The workers were coatless in the May air, their laughter vibrant with the realization that opportunity was only an hour long.

"Shall we go out too? You'll come to lunch, Hilda?"

She nodded, rather absently.

"We'll wait just a minute for Nearing. He was to come in about the council plan."

He did not see Hilda's start, and turned to put

away a paper. "Oh, Nearing? Come in. I'll be ready in a minute, Hilda."

The man in the door glanced, somewhat startled, at the other occupant of Boyce's office. The manager had an old-fashioned carefulness about using his purchasing agent's Christian name before other employés. As a matter of fact, their talks did not usually take place in the vicinity of Nearing or of the personnel department. But important discussions being on foot now, he was being admitted into the more formal intimacy of the chiefs.

He looked equal to it. The poise that comes from mastery is always unmistakable. Even the office boy, taking up a collection for boxing gloves, is distinguished from the mass because he has assumed a job and knows how to do it. And this man had more than mastery, had a certain resilience, a spark of vivid youth that made the manager suddenly look colorless.

"Well, Nearing, I've gone into it carefully."

"You can afford it, Mr. Boyce. You know the increase the whole hardware trade has made in the last years. If there is a war our business will go by leaps and bounds. We can stand higher wages if that were the only thing."

"I admit the plan sounds reasonable."

"More than that, Mr. Boyce. It's essential. You don't realize it now, but there's going to be factory reorganization everywhere pretty soon. It's a little

wrench for us now, and some sacrifice, but we have a good bunch of men. I know them. I can answer for their trying to give us a square deal."

"Our competitors —"

"They'll be copying us sooner or later."

Boyce paused over his paper, face immovable. There was no use arguing much further when he looked like that. The evidence was in and he was sifting it.

"In spite of that, I have decided that I cannot see my way to taking up this plan."

Boyce made his final check and looked up: Hilda had already looked. She got no personal glance; Guy's face turned bleak for a minute. There used to be such moments, in the old Nearing house, when she would have run from her chair to put her arms around him.

"I can't convince you by any more argument, Mr. Boyce?"

"I think not, Nearing. Now Hilda, shall we go?"

As she and the manager stood up together, Hilda saw a real darkness spread over Guy's face. He waited a moment in the doorway, watching Anson pick up her coat: Boyce had forgotten his presence. Anson, she sometimes thought, showed less friendliness to Guy than to anyone in the factory. He meant to be just, but some anciently rooted prejudice kept cordiality away.

But Guy's gray eyes flashed. "You won't be able

to stay by that decision, Mr. Boyce. I'll have something to show you."

"Very well."

Guy stood aside to let them pass. His eyes, catching Hilda's, were desolate, with all their resolution. "In time."

The matter was not referred to at lunch. Anson was particularly gentle. Coming back, they loitered in the May air, as was not customary with them. The grass was exceedingly green in the river lawn near the factory, and some children too small to go to school were hunting the first violets.

"Hilda, I have sometimes thought you looked tired these days."

"Work is a remedy, Anson." She smiled a little, and so did he, they knew so well what they were talking about.

After a pause he said astonishingly "You're happy, Hilda?"

"I am going to be."

Anson regarded her for some time. He looked rather an alien figure in the hazy sweetness of the May noon, watching her with that look that could change so little, no matter what it had to say.

"I should have been glad to make you happy. I — asked you once —"

"Oh Anson!" she cut him off quickly.

"I understand that that's all over. I knew very soon after I had spoken. I am too old."

"I never thought it!"

"Perhaps I have allowed you to adapt yourself too much to my middle-aged atmosphere. I took your companionship because it was so wholesome, Hilda. But I am growing very middle-aged. Don't grow with me."

She was silent.

Boyce said after a while: "However far away that other unknown man may be, I hope he knows how much he is expected."

"He knows."

Anson sighed a little as they turned to walk side by side toward the factory. He went with her to the door of her office and there took her hand very gravely.

"My dear," said Anson, with a little harsh note that touched her heart, "don't wait too long."

There were tears in Hilda's eyes.

"I wouldn't have worried you by speaking today, Hilda, except that I want to see you happy. I thought if I reminded you that I—care—I might help."

"I'm beginning to think I do need help, Anson."

They were silent by the door of her very prosaic office, while the workers hastened in one by one and took their seats at the desks, noting that the purchasing agent could not be consulted just now, because she was in conference with the manager.

"I wish you *could* ask something, Hilda."

"Letters, Miss Plaisted. And will you be in if the Munson man comes this afternoon?"

"Anson —!"

"Anything in my power!"

"The representative councils!"

Anson's expressionless face seemed to receive a shock. Some tremor traversed it, a tightening that passed. In that minute Anson knew.

"Tell him," he said, and passed down the hall.

So the Cato factory became a pioneer in a new order of things and its manager was congratulated and envied for the courage and foresight that had leaped in the dark.

The sun blazed into Hilda's office, shining on the brass handles of the filing cabinets and the bronze hair of Miss Kelly bending over one of them. Voices reverberated from the yard as a freight engine backed to and fro. By her open door, Smythe stood calling out questions, with a sheaf of letters in his hands.

"You sent for me, Miss Plaisted?"

Not since a hideous time two years ago had Hilda Plaisted sent for Guy Nearing. Miss Kelly glanced up: all the office force turned to take note of their former companion.

"Yes. Thank you, Miss Kelly. Not just immediately, Mr. Smythe. I wanted to say — Mr. Nearing — that Mr. Boyce has changed his mind about the representative councils. He wants you to go ahead with the plans."

Six excited heads looked up.

"I — congratulate you."

"Hildare!"

With all the heads at full attention he had taken one frantic step toward her. Then, while the office still gazed through the open door at the backs of Miss Plaisted and Mr. Nearing in conference about the plans of a new system of workmen's representation, destined to make the name both of the factory and Mr. Nearing, Guy stammered, Guy, who never stammered in his life, babbled like any school boy: "Hil! So you — will you — can you come out to the river bank?"

CHAPTER XIX

THE wordless period was not really ended. It had been a period such as Hilda had never imagined, for love in absence gives no intimations of it. Hilda, who knew all the sacrifices of love, was a little girl when it came to its privileges; she returned Guy's kisses, dazed and humble. The bright patch of sunlight had already left the grass on the riverbank, there were dark shadows below the rocks that meant the best part of the day was gone. Hilda raised her head, her arms still clinging, Guy's coat still against her cheek.

"Dear —"

There was a long pause, broken by neither — they let the word sink in. As the first beginning of speech, restrained, hesitating with pure joy, it was like the gentle notes of a lone violin which starts a symphony, the full music to come later.

"Put your head down again!"

His cry was sharp — Hilda laughed softly as she obeyed the command. "It's only, I'm going to think, some day, so hard about this that Mr. Near-ing will get the message."

"Yes. He'd listen to you."

She put up her hand at that. It was taken gently

and they sat in a silence, not of bitterness, while the river made its constant sucking sounds among the rocks. They let it speak, saying for them that they had sat in this place before, that what had happened since they sat so had been far other than they promised and yet was not to be wept for.

"Suppose I tell you," said Guy, his eyes on the dark ripples, "only one thing. It was you who did it — Hildare."

He added nothing to the name. From the tone of it Hilda understood as well as he that it was a name surpassing endearments. For the past many years it had been within Guy's right to use all the most caressing terms to any woman in the world except one. He had, perhaps, used them to some. But the only name he had never spoken had been Hildare.

"You did it, Hildare."

To that the river sang the prelude and the deep rushing music that shadowed and brightened the story, making the words tragic and playful, true and untrue, and still a final harmony. While she heard it, Hilda had been thinking, such joy-suffused thinking as was possible, with her eyes against her lover's lips.

"But now it's done. We start again. Even."

"Start even, Hildare?" Even when they sat so close as to be indistinguishable in the coming shadows he admitted that thoughtfully.

"Yes. I think it's only today that we're both grown up. We've lived the same number of years. We've learned the same number of things. It comes out the same in the end."

"Hildear!"

"The same in the end."

"Even if one person's years were scattered over the map all color and silliness and waste, and the others were built one on top of the other in order?"

"They brought the same amount of wisdom" — Hilda's smile was a little tremulous — "about — both love and work."

"Hil, do you understand — I'm sorry. That's what's kept me away from you all these years. That's what's haunted me all over the earth. That's what I was going to tell you when I was good enough."

"Now you will never say it again, my dear."

They were silent a while, till he said very low.

"I guess you understand it with once speaking."

"I couldn't have gone without it, Guy. But, I knew, you see. I knew that if the thing you did was bad, you weren't. You have belonged to me always. Whatever was in you, I have known."

"Have you known I was a fool?"

She smiled, utterly without care. The time had passed when she must stand ready to contradict and encourage on pain that he would be hurt. He *was* taking care of her now.

"Whatever I have known about you, Guy, I have known — since last we were sitting on the river-bank — like this."

"Last — like this? Twelve years, Hildare?"

"It wasn't long."

She saw his face, very reflective, as they sat close. "Your waiting time is over too, dear, did you understand? Your chance is ready for you. We are going to work side by side."

"I'm ready, Hil." He gathered her hand to him, pressing it gently against his face. "All these years, Hildare. When you knew I was a fool. What did you do about it?"

"Loved you."

"You did, didn't you?" Her palm was against his face. He placed slow kisses on it from wrist to fingertips, without her being able to see his eyes. At last he said: "Suppose you don't — remind me too often about — why you love me. It might make me conceited."

The river sang the postlude to that story. The birch leaves against the sky were black instead of sun-brimmed yellow. They heard the wind in the trees and the evening thrush.







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